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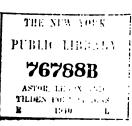
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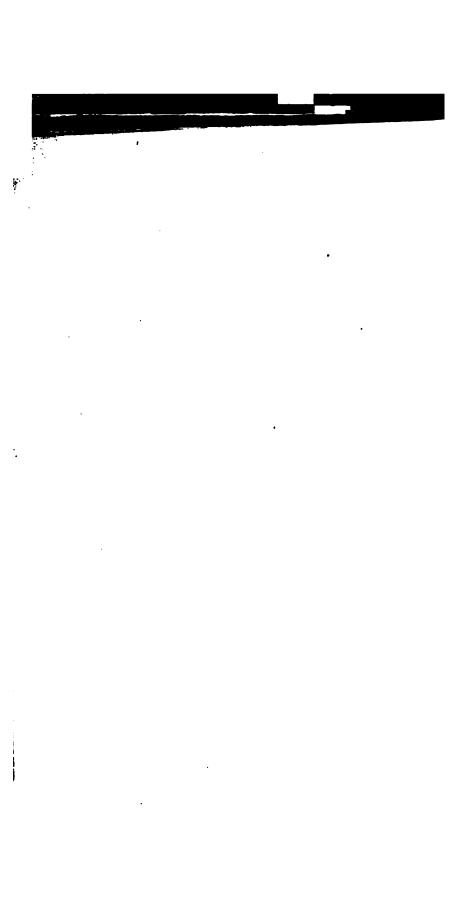
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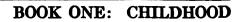
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TO THE WOMAN WHO WORKS AND STRIVES, IN HOME OR FACTORY, IN OFFICE OR SCHOOLROOM, IN CITY OR VILLAGE, TO THE WOMAN WHO SUPPORTS HERSELF IN A WORLD OF COMPETITION—IN ADMIRATION FOR HER COURAGE AND IN SYMPATHY WITH HER STRUGGLES, THIS STORY OF SUCH A ONE IS DEDICATED







BOOK ONE: CHILDHOOD

Chapter One

I HAVE just remembered that to-day is the eighteenth anniversary of my entrance into the business world. Looking back on that far-off day when as a big, rather awkward girl of seventeen, whose hair had been turned up for the occasion, I began to be a wageearner, I am full of wonder and pity-wonder that any one so inefficient and ignorant of Life could have come through to the comparative success and contentment of present days, and pity for the struggles and heartbreaks and disillusionments which it entailed. Perhaps these sorrows seem even more pitiful to the woman who is than to the girl who suffered them, for to her they were offset in some measure by a keen anticipation of pleasure and a vivid breathless realisation of happiness. As she suffered greatly, so in the same degree she rejoiced, while to the woman who is, the black and white of tragedy and happiness have faded to the grey of small worries and quiet content-tinged by a comfortable feeling of satisfaction at winning through.

I had a jolly care-free childhood. Of my Father I have little recollection, save that he was a dark, taci[9]

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I saw him standing by my Mother stern face. She was weeping, and I ier, then with a gradually mountin e hurting my Mother! My habitua ne till my love for her overcame my nto the room I threw my arms arou n a loud whisper, said, "Is he hurting you? Shall I kill She caught me in her arms, sm: ears. "Oh, my little Betty, never Father would hurt me!" Then turning e cross with her, Wilfred. She's our games in which I am always ! he is my knight who kills the drage o hurt me. You see she has no little s so much with me—and I would

and who was yet a stranger to me, i

namby-pamby child."

And with a smile which I had neve

you to have some one to play with and God says 'no', so you can't ever have a little brother or sister."

Promptly I sat upright, shaking my head emphatically, "I don't want no one—I don't want no one to play with but you."

Her low laugh rippled out—"Well, at least you are satisfied, little daughter!"

Soon after my sixth birthday came a time when I was told I must not make a noise, that I must play very quietly. There was a strange woman in the house with a white cap and every one went about on tip-toe with solemn faces. I was awestruck—were they all playing a game? During these long, uninteresting days, I only saw my Mother occasionally as she passed in and out of a door which was kept tightly closed. Aunt Mary had come to stay with us and I heard her say one day, "Won't you let the child see him?" And Mother's low reply,

"No, she wouldn't understand, and he wants no one but me."

Towards the evening of that same day, as I sat on the stairs, tired of playing alone and more tired of trying to be quiet, she came out of this room which seemed so mysterious, and stood a moment in the hall.

"Mother!" I called, peeping through the banisters, and waiting for her answering smile.

She looked up at me, yet did not seem to see me. Her face was all changed and strange—what had happened? I was frightened—the fear of something

unknown caught me and screaming I flew down the remaining stairs and flung myself against her.

She brushed her hand over her forehead. Then something hard in her face seemed to break and with a passion of tears she took me in her arms—"Oh, Betty, Betty, now I only have you!"

"Where is Father?" I asked.

"He has gone away-for ever."

"Why?"

"I don't know," she said, half bitterly, "I don't know, I can't understand—yet."

I stroked her cheek—"I'll take care of you, Mummy."

Soon after we moved to a new house and Aunt Mary and Aunt Agnes, two of Father's sisters, came to stay with us altogether.

I did not notice any vital change. I had seen so little of my Father, and everything seemed just the same. I did not know till much later how my Mother must have striven to make ends meet, nor till then did I know the keen envy of other girls who had fathers and who could do things which I could not because "we couldn't afford."

The new neighbourhood of Little Torbey was a small one, a sort of straggling overflow from Torbey, itself a suburb of the large city of Linesmoor. Lanes and fields separated it from its parent town, giving it a seclusion which made it an ideal place for a playground, and as almost every house contributed at least

one child to our games, the inhabitants were apt to consider the doubtful wisdom of living in glass houses and throwing stones, if they felt inclined to complain of the noise we made, or the occasional havoc we did.

Our house was tall and thin, four storeys from cellar to attic, and one of my first feats was to be able to run from top to bottom without stopping to get my breath. I practised till I could do it in a minute. I think that the house must have lain in a hollow, because after one period of unusually heavy rains, the cellar flooded and I came down one morning to find the household busily engaged in brushing and scooping out several inches of water. What fun, and how I wished it would happen often! They looked so amusing as they paddled about in old shoes, and as I joined them, getting in the way of people who were too busy and miserable to bother with me, I enjoyed to the uttermost this unusual experience of paddling in my own home.

Adjoining the house which was at the end of a row was a large field popularly called the Brick-Field—why I know not as there were no signs of a kiln, and it was then a dumping ground for old machinery—cranes and presses, mortars and trestles lay around in a state of rust and dilapidation, endangering our lives but enhancing our games. For me it was a Paradise. Two tumble-down sheds served as hiding places, or as vantage grounds from which we could spy "the enemy."

I soon found a pal and kindred spirit, a girl called

Nettie Holmes, to whom I looked up with keen admiration because she was even more daring than I and had a vivid, pretty face which I envied immensely. She and I were known as "The Tomboys." The rest of our usual gang consisted of a girl called Kitty, and five boys—two brothers, William and John Hovey, and three others. Though the other children joined in our games, they were admitted rather as a favour than by right; "the eight" could always be found together—if one were guilty, it was a safe bet that the other seven were in it too.

We three girls shared the danger and punishment with the boys on absolutely equal terms. There was no excuse or suggestion of feminine weakness, no consciousness of sex, for although we had our special pals among the boys, it was an entirely free and easy camaraderie-sentiment would have embarrassed us and spoiled goodfellowship. We were as hardy as they, nearly as speedy and equally scornful of pain or tears. One favourite game was "Prisoners," and on a day when Nancy and I and Kitty-who though short and fat was nevertheless a speedy runner-were "the enemy," we were given three minutes before being attacked. Off we raced to our "fort." This was a structure made of tall poles leaning up against a crosspiece on supports and forming a narrow foothold just where the poles interlaced. There was only room for one foot at a time, the ledge being about ten feet from the Swarming up the supports, we gained our position and yelled defiance to the boys who soon came

running to the attack, which was doomed to failure for the simple reason that as soon as clinging fingers came within reach up the supports, we stepped on them.

After their first defeat "the enemy" withdrew and held a pow-wow. Presently with a shout they ran away and disappeared around the shed. We ought to have taken warning and escaped while we could, for soon they returned, brandishing long sticks from which something black and shiny was dripping.

It was tar!

"Yah!" shouted the leaders, "now you're real prisoners," and forthwith the band began smearing every means of descent to earth with the nasty, wet liquid.

This was serious. Even with our disregard of clothes we could hardly face the prospect of swarming down tar-covered poles. It would mean such trouble when we went home. Our faces lost their complacency—we began to think hard, for soon only a few poles remained untarred. Then William Hovey, possessed by a devil, or reading something in my face which most assuredly was not there, shouted,

"Hey, you fellers Betty's goin' to jump!"

They stopped their work and watched—"No," said John, "she daren't."

I hadn't had the slightest intention of jumping—nothing was further from my mind. It was a ten-foot drop and even then there was no "let," for the ground fell away from the side of the supports to a hollow, a few more feet deep.

But after this dare, there was nothing else to do.

"Of course, I'm going to jump," I said in a lordly tone, but with a decidedly shaking inside. "Did you suppose I was going to stay here for ever. But there's one thing—if I jump will you let the other gir— prisoners go?"

A momentary discussion—"Yes, we'll let them go—'cos they're quite safe, you daren't jump."

I heaved a sigh,—no help in that direction—relaxed my body and let it fall.

There was a moment's breathless silence. Landing just on the edge of the broken ground, my knees hit my chin with a terrible smash and I rolled over into the hollow.

All eyes watched me. Badly did I want to feel if my knees had come through to the roof of my mouth, or the roof of my mouth to the top of my head. But that would have looked like admitting partial defeat. Picking myself up slowly, I said in as firm a tone as I could,

"Told you I'd jump!"

But I took a very early opportunity of talking of lessons which *had* to be done and which would make it necessary for me to go home soon. And no one said a word!

At the back of our house was a fair-sized yard, leading directly into the Brick-Field. The opportunity for economy was too good to be lost—we must keep chickens. And very soon with my inveterate love of

animals, I had tamed several of them so completely that not only would they eat out of my hand, but they were apparently quite willing to have me pick them up and caress them. I cannot but smile as I think of the funny picture which must have been made by the thin, long-legged child, hugging to her breast a fat, clumsy hen, its yellow feet sticking helplessly forth.

But they did not bring me all joy, for there were awful days when the meat bills were reduced by the substitution of roast chicken! How my heart sank when I knew that Susy or Speckly or Polly had been butchered! At dinner there was no sign of my usual healthy appetite and as I picked languidly at the food and tried to swallow enough to appease Mother who was troubled by "such foolishness," I suffered intensely at the thought of what to me was heartless cannibal-When finally one Spring, the chicken-run was devastated by rats or weasels and I saw the mangled bodies of what had yesterday been lively yellow balls, the memory followed me through many, many nights and I would awake in an awful clammy tensity as I listened for any further signs of disturbance in the Fortunately, soon after, Mother decided that all things considered, the experiment did not reduce the cost of living, and I breathed a very heart-felt sigh of relief that my feelings would no longer be harrowed.

Nettie and I vied with each other in growing like bean-stalks and I suppose two girls with more perfect health could not be found. The exercise and

every available minute spent in the open air gave us the glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes of physically perfect organisms. We must have looked funny creatures with our tall, thin bodies, our tightly tied-back hair and thick, clumsy boots. Skirts were only worn as a concession to opinion and were so short that they were not nearly such an intrinsic article of apparel as our blue serge knickers. The only interest we had in clothes was the negative one that they should not hamper our movements and the distressing one that they would get torn.

Chapter Two

HEN I was about ten years old, a new, and from my point of view, not entirely pleasing association came into my life. I was sitting on the wall between our house and the field, when a carriage stopped at the gate and out of it came a very grand lady with a little girl. I sat open-mouthed and watched, for such visitors were a phenomenon—they were coming up our path! With the lightning speed of practice I slipped off the wall and rushing into the house, shouted,

"Mother! There's two people coming here all dressed up."

My Mother opened the door and her face went white. Then with a little gasping cry, she ran forward and threw her arms around the lady and kissed her.

"Jane," she cried, "I didn't expect to see you." Who was this?

"No, Marian, of course you're surprised. I did not write because it was difficult after all these years. We have left London and John's business will be in Linesmoor for some time."

"How nice, then we shall see you often."

"I hope so-and this is your little girl!"

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"Yes, this is my Betty," and my Mother drew me to her side.

The lady looked at me. I saw disapproval in her cold blue eyes—disapproval of my hair, my old dress, in which I tried to hide a recent tear, of my awkward shifting from foot to foot.

"Betty, this is your Aunt Jane."

"Give me a kiss, my dear."

I wriggled and hesitated. To me a kiss was a solemn mark of affection and love, only lavished on my Mother and my cat. Instinctively too, I disliked this tall, wonderful-looking woman. She was like my Mother, and yet how different—she had eyes of the same blue colour, a straight, well-shaped nose and the same curling, gold-brown hair. But my Mother's smile lit up her whole face whereas my Aunt's barely parted her lips and never reached her eyes. How could I know that the beauty I saw in my Mother's face was so much of the spirit. That out of her blue eyes smiled her intense love for me, on her patient lips was the sadness of years spent alone, and over all her face the indomitable spirit which knew Life and was not afraid.

I assuredly did not want to kiss this new aunt and as I was not very successful in hiding my feelings, she probably knew it.

"She hasn't very pretty manners," said Aunt Jane. "This is my little darling, my Margaret."

The little darling came forward and with a pretty [20]

smile said "Good afternoon, Aunt Marian," and held up her face to be kissed—without being asked to.

She was dressed in white, even to her shoes and stockings, and her hair was curling and fluffy under her large white hat. I glared at her and longed to bury my fingers in the curls.

"Good afternoon, Cousin Betty," she said, and kissed me too. Turning my head, I wiped a grimy hand across my mouth. I was jealous of these people whom my Mother seemed so pleased to see.

"We'll let bygones be bygones, eh, Marian? After all a family ought to stick together, and though I still think you were foolish to marry poor Wilfred, with not a penny to his name, he's dead now, poor fellow, so we'll be the old sisters again."

A momentary sternness chased the joy from my Mother's face.

"Those seven happy years were worth all the poverty," she said earnestly. "But let's talk about something on which we can agree," she went on smiling. "Betty, you can take Margaret and show her your playground."

I looked at her spotless white shoes—"She'll get them dirty," I muttered, then in a lordly tone and not without malice in the thought that punishment might be in store for her, "Come on!"

We went into the garden and I pointed to the rockery. "That's the way over the wall to the field, but perhaps we'd better go through the gate, or you'll dirty your dress."

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"It doesn't matter, I have a clean one every day."

"Swank!" I muttered. Then as the wonder of the thing burst upon me—"Are you always dressed in white?"

"Of course," she replied.

I whistled. What an amazing thing.

"How far can you throw a brick?" I asked.

"Throw a brick?"—she looked puzzled.

"Yes, a brick-a stone."

"Throw a stone—why should I throw a stone?"

Why should she throw a stone—oh my hat! dropped this subject, it didn't seem a happy one.

"How high can you jump?"

"I've never tried to jump."

I looked at her in wonder. What could she do. "Can you play cricket, or rounders, or bowling cap?" She shook her head.

"What can you do?"

"Oh I can ride—I chiefly go for walks, or a gallop on my pony."

"On your pony—does it belong to you?"

"Of course, and I'm going to have a horse when I'm older."

New vistas opened—a pony of one's own—what a strange thing!

My Aunt came to see us often after this and it always seemed as if I were specially untidy and dilapidated on her visits. I knew, too, that she disapproved of me and this made me furious, so that I appeared to the greatest disadvantage before her.

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One day when I came in with my hands covered with mud through trying to prevent the *rest* of me from going into the brook, she was there. As I went into the little hall-cupboard to wash it off, I heard her say,

"Marian, I don't know how you can let that child run so wild, she won't have any manners."

"But she is truthful and honest to the bottom of her heart and incapable of deceit," said my Mother gently. "Those are good things on which to build manners. You know, Jane, I feel so sure that I can manage the decorations beautifully if only I can build the foundations strong and sure, but what use would artistic finishing-touches be, if the building were shaky and insecure? Betty's manners will improve when she leaves off trying to be a boy—and you know she has very deep feelings."

"Deep feelings," said my Aunt, with a sniff, "for whom, pray?"

"For me," my Mother answered, and as I peeped through the door, I saw that lovely funny look crinkle her eyes—"for me, and her cat!" Then half-sadly, "I am afraid she is one of the few people who cannot scatter their love but pour it out all on one beloved object."

"Then Heaven help her if she ever falls in love!"
The sadness deepened in my Mother's face, and as
I came back she drew me to her with a passionate
protective gesture, and I think I was the only one to

and with a fox-terrier on a of "bear-baiting" game. I to let the yapping, snarling was covered with mud an pitiable little object. In my were predominant. It made stopping to think I rushed i of a boy's hand, and quickly into my arms. "Whose cat is "I dunno," said one boy, should be in the stopping to take it will be a source of the said one boy, should be said to said one boy, should be said to said one boy, should be said to said the sai

"Well, I'm going to take it erect, I walked away. Walked told me that any sign of fright my heels, and the knowledge thout interference has been us sciously I realised that the objections is speedy action, and of contention before the other than half the battle gained.

When I reached home I was the kitten, and Mother gasped my clothes. But with her was a second second

I squeezed it so tightly that it yowled and my Mother laughed—"Oh, Betty, I hope I haven't taught you to champion the oppressed too much. It's a difficult game. Now I'm afraid we shall have to bathe the kitty, and you, too."

And we did. The kitten there and then had the first and last bath in its life, and I have sometimes wondered whether it would not have preferred to be left to the tender mercies of the boys rather than suffer the indignity of soap and water.

But it quickly forgave us and thereafter was my inseparable companion in the house. How I loved that cat! It represented my pity for everything that was downtrodden and unlucky for it was an ill-favoured little beast and all the care and good-feeding it received never made it grow fat and sleek. It had a yellow-white breast and its coat was a mixture of fawn and grey, but in spite of its pathetic appearance, I said I was going to call it "Beauty." My Mother smiled as she suggested that was hardly a suitable name.

"But that's its name," I said doggedly, thinking, in my pity, that the bestowal of "Beauty" might in some vague way compensate for the lack of the desirable attribute.

"Very well, dear, but I think you'll regret it."

And I did, for whenever I called, "Beauty, Beauty," and the animal appeared, people smiled. It grew to be a sore subject, for I resented the judgment on my

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kitty and I hated ridicule; it was only cussedness which forbade me changing the unlucky word.

In many ways that cat brought me trouble. It made me burst forth one day at my Aunt, because she laughed at the name, and when she heard its history, she turned to my Mother and said,

"She's too passionate and self-willed, by far."

"I would rather she felt too much than not at all, and as for self-will, she will need every atom of it in making her career. You forget, Jane, she has to fight her own way in the world, she has no Father."

"Well, she won't be bad-looking, if she is dressed right, and she'll probably be able to marry."

"Yes, but she may not be fortunate enough to find the necessary love."

"Oh love is all right, but she may be thankful if she gets a good man to look after her—though she'll probably never see what she *ought* to be thankful for."

My Mother's face grew stern. "I hope she will never marry unless there is that love on both sides which alone makes marriage endurable. Oh, Jane," she went on, softening, "don't teach your little Margaret that wealth is more important than love—don't let her miss that greatest happiness of loving and being loved. I am trying to bring Betty up to that beautiful conception of womanhood in 'Sesame and Lilies'—I wish that every word of it might be engraved on every Mother's heart as it is on mine—'Secure for her such physical training and exercise as may confirm her health and perfect her beauty . . . then as the strength

she gains will permit you, fill and temper her mind with all knowledge and thoughts which tend to confirm its natural instincts of justice and refine its natural tact of love. . . . Give them (girls) the same advantages as you give their brothers, appeal to the same grand instincts of virtue in them, teach them that courage and truth are the pillars of their being.' Don't you think that is a splendid ideal, that it makes all the more terrible the indictment—'you know that there is hardly a girl's school in this Christian kingdom where the children's courage and sincerity would be thought of half so much importance as their way of coming in at a door.' I am trying to show Betty the way, but 'you cannot hammer a girl into anything' though 'she may fall and defile her head in the dust if you leave her without help at some moments of her life. . . . ' Doesn't that give us Mothers a tremendous responsibility?"

My Mother's face was shining, her hands clasped as she broke through her usual reserve and enunciated her creed. I stood by her side, fascinated by her voice, awed by the something which was lighting up her deep blue eyes, shining from her face, so that it seemed not only the face of my Mother, but of that Divine being of whom she taught me and of whom my childish heart had only a dim conception.

Even my Aunt was spellbound by the beauty of her face and her intense thrilling voice. For a moment I think she saw "better things." Then as the voice

ceased, she reddened and shook herself as if to cast off the influence. Regaining her usual poise, she said, "Yes, of course, Marian, that's all very fine, but isn't old what's-his-name rather an idealist?"

The light faded from my Mother's face. Her head went back and her silvery laugh rang out. "Oh, Jane, Jane!—well, it serves me right for clucking like an old hen over my one wee chick. Let us go and have some tea."

It sometimes seemed as though my cat were an unlucky mascot, so many other troubles came through it. One day it had wandered into the field and William Hovey, with whom I had had a standing feud for several weeks (the original reason for which I have forgotten) seeking to annoy me, caught it up and threw it in my direction. To do him justice, he did not hurt the animal and she had probably suffered more discomfort from my over-kindness at many times. But his act was just the last straw. With blazing eyes, I strode up to him, "Now, I'm going to fight you!"

At first he grinned. This added fuel to my wrath, and with all my strength, I hit him on the chin. "Now will you fight?" I panted.

He certainly would—and did, and losing his temper, he hit out hard. His fist caught me in the eye. The battle raged for two minutes longer, then grabbing me by the shoulders, he put me on the ground. I lay there, collecting my scattered senses and feeling my eye swelling rapidly. He noticed it too, and the fight

having dispersed our bad tempers, he helped me up and with a shamefaced air, said,

"I say, I'm awfully sorry, but you know you hit me and I lost my temper."

"It's quite all right!" I said magnanimously, "it was a fair fight."

I went home slowly and thoughtfully. With the cooling of my temper, I felt rather ashamed. Creeping into the house, I turned on the cold water tap and for five minutes bathed the eye. Then I examined it in the glass. It did look bad. Mother saw me coming down the stairs—"Hello! Whenever did you come in? I didn't hear your usual fairy footsteps," she said laughing.

I stopped to tie an imaginary shoe-lace, thus deferring the evil day of explanation. But still she waited, so I forced my unwilling feet down the remaining stairs. She gasped—"Whatever's happened to your eye?"

"It got a little hurt," I said in a light tone, attempting to slide into the dining room, where it was not so light.

But she grasped my arm—"Why, it's badly hurt. How did it happen?"

I wriggled and hesitated and finally blurted out,

"Fighting!"

"Fighting-fighting what?"

"A boy."

"And do you mean to tell me he struck you?" Her blue eyes were very angry—"The coward!"

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This was awful—the innocent party was going to get the blame. Hastily I tried to explain.

"No, it wasn't his fault, really and truly. We have been in a feud lately and to-day he just threw my cat, and so—I hit him and he had to fight, really and truly, Mother, I don't think he meant to hurt it"—justice forced the admission from me,—"but it was the last straw."

"Who was it?"

In sheer misery, I was wondering whether I dare risk a blank refusal of the information, when mastered by her unusual indignation I found the words slipping slowly from my lips—"William Hovey."

"I shall tell his Mother and he must apologise."

She never interfered—I got desperate, and clinging to her arm, I pleaded—"Mother, you can't, I should be branded as a tell-cat, it was a fair fight, I can't bear it if you tell his Mother."

"He shouldn't have hit a girl." And that was all she would say. I suffered more pain from the breach of our code of never implicating another, than I did from the eye. Next day she told me that he had apologised to her and that his Mother had been horrified.

"You didn't tell her!" I cried.

"I did, and so if it was your fault, Betty, let this be a lesson to you to restrain your temper, or other people may suffer through it."

"But didn't he tell his Mother that it was my fault, that I hit him first?"

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"No, he didn't. He just said, 'I'm very sorry.'"

My heart opened in admiration. I was so ashamed to meet him again that I avoided him for days, but after a week's self-denial of the play-ground, I saw him sitting on the wall, kicking it with his heels, and whistling merrily. I plunged breathlessly, "You don't think I told on purpose do you—I was asked straight out—I'm awfully sorry, but you don't think I'm a tell-cat, do you?"

"Oh, no," he said with a cheery smile, "you're quite a sport."

"Did you get in a row?"

"I got the stick," he answered grimly.

Remorse cut deep into my heart. "I think you are a brick not to say it was my fault. I'll never fight again."

I climbed up and sat on the wall by his side. We talked of many things and from that day we were firm friends and he became my own particular pal.

Chapter Three

BUT I was to learn that repentance does not always bring immunity from the consequence of wrong-doing. My troubles from the black eye were not yet over. A visit to my Aunt Jane's had been planned and Mother said that I must go. I think she did not dwell on my Aunt's point of view, but on the discipline it would give me.

The carriage met me at the station. In it sat my gaily dressed aunt and cousin, all in beautiful shining white. The footman held the door and I walked in with the well eye on her side. As soon as I turned round, she exclaimed, "Gracious, child, what have you done to your eye?"

"It got hurt—Aunt Jane, Mother sends her love, and——"

"However did you get a blow like that?" she interrupted. I heaved a sigh,—well she would have it. "Fighting."

"Hush!" she said, grabbing my arm and sitting me down. Out of the corner of my good eye, I saw a suspicion of a smile on the footman's face as he closed the door. It froze again to his usual calm, as my Aunt turned a momentary eagle look towards him,—"Home, James."

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Oh, the enquiries that were made about that eye. One would think that it was the first black eye in the world's history. When we went into the house, the parson, a fat old gentleman, with a kind and merry smile, was waiting to see my Aunt. As I shook hands with him, "Hello," he said, "how did you hurt your eye?"

My Aunt's face flushed, as I looked up a moment before replying.

"Oh, she knocked it," she said hastily. "Now, Betty, go along to the nursery." I was hurried out or I should have told the nice old man the truth, for I felt that he would understand. I was rather shocked at this first fib, but soon got a malicious pleasure in hearing my Aunt make excuses and counting up the number of times. It was a source of continual embarrassment to her for she hated to think that I knew she was fibbing and yet admit that her niece had done anything so degrading—never! It was the only time I got even with her.

That visit which began badly, ended worse. The mornings were delightful, for then we rode alternately on Margaret's pony, but the afternoons were wearying. She was having a short respite from lessons, so after dinner in the schoolroom, we went for a walk with her governess. And in lanes bordered with splendid trees which just asked to be climbed, across fields with little streams simply made to be jumped over—we walked!—walked, sedately and quietly to the accompaniment of "Margaret, don't shuffle your

feet,"—"You are stooping"—"Lift up your head." To walk! When all nature was telling me to jump and run and sing aloud. Had that woman ever known the joy of throwing a brick straight and true, till, with a resounding ping, it hit the object aimed at? I looked at her rather weary face and decided that she had not.

"How do you stand it, Margaret?"

"Stand what?" she said, puzzled.

"This sort of thing—walks. It bores me stiff. I'm glad I haven't got a governess."

"But I always go for walks."

That was it, she had always done it—she had never known the joy of doing all the things that I had done. Some day I would show her.

By the unhappiness of Fate, that day came soon. It happened that the governess was ill, so Aunt Jane said that we must be good little girls and play quietly, and "don't go out of the grounds," she said.

"Come on, Margaret," I shouted as soon as we were out of the house, and catching her hand, I raced and jumped over the green, smooth lawns to where a wood of thick trees waved to and fro in the gentle wind. It was a late spring day, warm and sunny, and my energy leapt to the freedom after many days of continual supervision.

"Now I'll teach you to climb a tree." Margaret looked timid but since seeing her prowess on her pony, I had learned to be less scornful of her powers—she would soon learn.

I pushed and helped her till she gained the first [34]

spreading branch of a great oak, and eyes sparkling with achievement, she shouted, "It's fine!"

We had a lovely time, rolling down grassy slopes, exploring rabbit holes, climbing trees, throwing stones. Her white dress was not improved, but it would wash.

"Let's go and see the pony before going in for tea," said Margaret.

We stroked its soft nose and its long flowing tail. On a ledge by its box was a pair of shears. I took them up and began nibbling with them at the thick tail. I had tasted the sensation of cutting thick hair on my own head more than once, but this was better, there was more resistance.

"Just try, Margaret," I said, "it's fine."

She squealed with delight as the shears met in the thick hair, met, cut, and lo! a hank had gone to join the others. We began by nibbling, but in our enthusiasm, forgot everything. Suddenly we realised that the tail had grown much shorter. Margaret felt uneasy. "We'll get into a row," she said.

"I'll make it even and then it won't look bad." Alas, it was a task beyond me. Fast as I cut one piece to match another, that other seemed to disagree with the next. I began to hurry.

A shadow darkened the door-way.—"Eh, what you two little gals doin'?"

I stood away and surveyed my work. It was not a decided success. Up went George's hands—"There'll be a foine row when Missis knows, I can tell yer."

"Don't tell her," said Margaret quickly.

"No need ter tell 'er, she'll see it all roight, and then—" Phew!—his lips went into a long whistle.

Two or three days passed and we had almost forgotten the incident when we heard Aunt Jane talking in angry tones to George.

"How dare you cut the pony's tail like that. I shall tell Mr. March to give you notice—you're not fit to take care of the animal."

Margaret and I, coming down for our morning ride, looked at each other aghast. "We must tell," I whispered.

"No, don't," said Margaret. "I'm frightened, don't."

"Don't be a coward," I said grandly, and head up in air marched forward. "George didn't do it, Aunt Jane, I did."

The fact that she had blamed the wrong person added to her rage. "You're a wicked little girl. I won't have you with Margaret any longer. You shall go home at once."

To my surprise Margaret came forward and with a white face stammered, "I did it too, Mother."

"Then you shall be punished," she said, stalking indoors.

"George, you're a sport," I said, "shake hands."

His wrinkled old weather-beaten face gleamed. "Eh, bless yer, miss, Oi'd do more than thet for yer bonny blew oiyes which 'er loike yer Mother's."

"Did you know my Mother?"

"Course Oi did, when she were just about yer 'eight, [36]

and me and missus 'ad just got sploiced. I worked for 'er father—eh, she were a 'oigh-spirited gal, she were."

"Where did she live?"

"In Lunnon, course, with 'er father, the old master—she could roide too."

"Ride! Did she have a pony?" The thing was beyond conception.

"Course she did—it were a foine plice yer grand-father 'ad."

"Where is he?"

"Dead, course. They do say as 'ow the shock of yer Mother's elopement——" He stopped short and the reminiscent look faded—— "eh, weigh, Jarge," he muttered, "yer runnin' away, loike."

"My Mother's elopement," I said, my eyes opening wider, "what was that?" He hesitated—— "You must tell me, George, or I shall go and ask my Aunt." The threat was enough.

"Well, yer see yer grandfather wanted 'er to marry a foine young man called Sir 'arry somethin'-or-other—it's so long since and my old 'ead's forgotten—but yer Mother loved a poor man, an' so she eloped with 'im—ran away—an' 'er father never forgive 'er—left all 'is money to 'er—" he jerked a thumb towards the house— "an' 'is son."

"How splendid of my Mother!" I said, glowing with admiration, "and she never told me."

"Now, missie, don't be saiying thet Oi tell yer, or Missis moight sack me agin."

"Would you really have gone without saying a word, George?"

His old eyes twinkled—"Well, missie, Master is a rare understanding koind of man. Oi reckon Oi could 'ev explained to 'im. 'Er's sacked me many toimes, but Oi'm still 'ere, yer see."

"Well, anyway, I think it was pretty sporty of you. And you too, Margaret, I'd never have believed you'd have owned up."

She swallowed the doubtful compliment and her eyes gleamed. That day marked the beginning of a new understanding between us—on her part admiration for my strength, and aptitude for getting in and out of scrapes, and on my part a sort of tolerant protectiveness which gradually ripened into a very real affection.

Aunt Jane took me home that afternoon like a prisoner at the bar. I resented her attitude with all my might and secretly felt glad that I had cut her old pony's tail. Leading me by the hand, she burst forth with,

"Marian, I'm sorry I have had to bring your daughter home. She has been a very wicked little girl."

Poor Mother looked startled—"Oh, Jane, wicked?—what has she done?"

Thereupon Aunt Jane recited all my misdeeds, which lost nothing in the telling. At the mention of the tail-cutting, my Mother looked relieved though still unhappy. "You can go out of the room, Betty, I will talk to you later."

When we were alone, she told me how much it had hurt her to have me *brought* home like that, and how I must think before doing anything—"will it hurt any one else?"—that would help to keep me from doing thoughtless things.

"I am very sorry, Mother. You know I did not mean to cut the pony's tail, I just began to snip little tiny bits, and then it grew shorter and shorter, and in the end we were only trying to make it look better. I just didn't think."

"You must try and think, or you will make people suffer very much without meaning to. And I think you ought to write a nice letter to your Aunt, thanking her for having you to stay with her, and saying how sorry you are."

I was full of the other news I had learned and with an unusually meek, "Yes, Mother," I put my arms around her neck and said,

"I think it was splendid of you to elope!"

She started—"Who has been talking to you?"

"Well, I'd rather not say, Mother, if you don't mind, but why didn't you tell me, it was fine of you."

Her eyes saddened. "I have never told you, Betty, because you are too young to understand, and I feared it would appeal to you as a romantic deed and I don't want you to think it was fine. I ought to have had more patience for my Father loved me best of all and it broke his proud old heart. It was right of me to marry your Father for there was no one else for me but him, but I ought to have waited and perhaps Daddy

would have seen things differently—he was proud of me, he naturally wanted to see me shine in a big social way. Oh, Betty, we can't defy those we love without suffering. I pray that you will never have to make such a choice."

"Oh, no, Mother, I won't, 'cos I couldn't ever love any one as much as you."

She kissed me and laughed, "Well, we shall see!"

Chapter Four

T the back of all my childish endeavour might be **A** found the same impulse—the fear of missing anything. Whatever was taking place, in that I must have a part—be it skating, swimming, hockey, or the more graceful accomplishments of dancing and music. And because of our poverty there were many difficulties to be overcome, difficulties which seemed all the harder as I grew to the sensitive age of fourteen. skating season, for instance, was only partly a time of pleasure—there was much misery due to weak ankles, boots which were always one, and often two sizes too big (in view of propensities for rapid growth) and skates which had been handed down from Mother. As I sprawled ungracefully over the ice, I looked with envy upon Nettie who did everything well, whose boots fitted her, whose skates were her own shining pair of Acmes. Mine were funny wooden things, secured by a multitude of straps which always broke under my vigorous onslaughts, and in the middle of the heel a long steel screw. Oh, the hours of patient boring with a gimlet into heels made more durable by heavy nails—the hopelessness of getting the clumsy skates on tight and firm—the bumps and bruises as day after day, and season after season I persevered,

often coming off the ice sick and dizzy from the innumerable falls. Indeed if a rigid count had been taken, I am sure the greater part of my time would have been occupied by a much more intimate contact with the ice than that made by my feet! I never skated well and sometimes in the bottom of my heart I was not sorry when the season was over and that keen fear of missing anything no longer drove me to a sport in which the pleasure was counteracted by envy and pain, and a sensitive dread of an allusion to the poverty of my outfit.

It was the same with everything I wanted to do-it meant long hours of difficult consideration of ways and means-braving the ridicule caused by a fearful and wonderful bathing suit I had tried to make myself, walking home from parties instead of the grandeur of the cabs which carried other children-struggles to pick up dancing without the lessons which even Nettie and Kitty regarded with equanimity because it made them favourite partners with the older boys. But do things I would-nothing should be missed, and sometimes now as I look at the splendour of appliance with which some modern child is equipped for amusement, I wonder whether some of the steadfast determination to overcome those childish difficulties did not help in later years to surmount the real problems of Life-whether in parents' efforts to smooth so completely the path for their child, they do not perhaps weaken its latent resistance to difficulties which seem unsurmountable and which yet can be overcome.

In everything I tried to do, there was Mother's cheerful, loving encouragement—when in a fit of temper and desperation I threw boots and gimlet to the floor and said, "I can't do it," she would say in her gay voice,

"Let me see if I can help!" and backed up by her interest I would begin the task with fresh zeal. Many, many things she must have gone without to give me little pleasures—many, many walks she took in snow and ice to bring me home from parties, and though I did not then fully understand the sacrifices she made, I loved her so much that in hurting or disappointing her I suffered terribly.

My clothes were one of the chief things which came between us. I tried hard not to damage them, but I had no luck. If there was a nail, my dress was the one to catch on it—if there was tar or paint, I was the one who got into it.

One morning I set out in a new blue serge dress which was worn for school because we were having an illustrious visitor—a Princess who was interested in education. The school to which Nancy, Kitty and I went was situated between Torbey and Linesmoor, a walk which took us the best part of an hour, and often enough on our way home, the branches of a great hoary oak would tempt us to make it our halfway house and resting place. But on this particular day I had had a special warning to be very careful and remembering this all the way to school, I felt a glow of satisfaction that I had not thrown a brick, or

kicked one, or run, or done anything in which injury might come to my clothes. Alas! After the excitement of the morning, the warning was completely forgotten. Making for our usual resting-place, we sat swinging our legs from a favourite bough, and discussing the visitor and how our curtseys had been made.

A boy passed underneath—"Hey, that branch is rotten, it's going to break," he shouted.

Without stopping to think that it was probably just mischief, we turned on our stomachs, grasped the bough with our hands, swung and let go. It was the work of a moment.

A terrible rending sound! And there fluttering gaily from a point on the bough was a piece of my new dress.

Oh, the awful feeling of despair—if only that short moment's work could be undone! The dismembered piece was so large that I had to fasten the jagged edges together with a safety pin before I could go home in anything like decent apparel.

Each step became more leaden. I had destroyed the work over which my dear one had spent hours and hours—how pleased she had looked that morning. What bitter regrets and what remorse!

Ever after I hated wearing that darned and patched blue serge, for it reminded me so vividly of what I suffered in telling her of the tragedy. Her sad and disappointed, "Oh Betty," sent me to my room to weep most bitter tears.

Another dress in which I endured agonies of mind was a "best" one of pale blue. The material was a present, for Mother would never have bought me anything so unuseful. I was used to navy blue serge and thick boots, and should feel terribly conspicuous in what was called, "such a pretty dress"! When it was ready, I was to wear it for church. Mother had spent hours on it so that I could not tell her I did not like it—and all my hopes that it might rain being frustrated by a day unusually sunny and warm for spring, out I set.

By the time I reached the church my feelings had grown stronger and stronger and I seemed to have an enormous body blazing in blue, which would infallibly attract everybody's attention to that, and my equally blazing cheeks. It was a wretched morning.

And yet that same blue dress marked an epoch in my childhood. My new clothes always came along in bits—a new dress—a few months later, a new hat—then on other odd occasions, boots and gloves, so that the glow of the spring sun shining on a new blue serge dress was tempered by the gloom of a winter hat which had weathered many storms. On the few occasions when the subject of dress forced itself on my attention I lamented this fact—for once I would like to have been new altogether, but I knew what a struggle each new garment cost, and only when I saw Nancy in an entirely fresh rig-out, did I feel that things were not quite equal.

Thus with the new blue dress, I had to wear my
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old winter hat, a somewhat faded dark blue which had seen much service. It looked terrible with the bright dress—something had to be done. I did not mind looking altogether old, but this was "a silk stocking and a clog." Money was not available for a new hat, so hunting in the family treasure bag, I found a It had been a lovely, curling ostrich, black and glossy, and though its beauty was dimmed, it was still a handsome thing. I cut off the old blue ribbon and draped the feather right around the crown. covered the worst deficiencies, but then I found that it did not fit in with my tightly-tied back hair, smoothed and brushed till it was hardly visible from the front. I thought for a moment, then unplaiting it, I took a wet comb and fluffed it out in front, curled quite nicely and the hat looked much better. Proudly I went to Mother. She gave a little gasp.

"What have you been doing?"

"I've been trying to fit the hat to the 'pretty blue dress,' and myself to the hat. I know inside just how it should all go together."

"Why, child, that feather is far too old for you."
"But, Mother, it hides the faded part"—and so the feather stayed, and I went off to Sunday school.

Nettie was standing by the door and came to meet me. A few paces away she stopped and into her face came a look of puzzled surprise.

"Why, Betty, what have you done to yourself? You look quite—quite pretty!"

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"Oh, it's these fool clothes," I answered off-hand-edly, and very much embarrassed.

But inwardly my heart leaped. The back-handed nature of the compliment and her intense surprise did not occur to me. I went home with a new point of view.

"Mother, do you think I am pretty?"

"Whoever put that idea into your head?"

"It was Nettie, and she was so surprised."

My Mother laughed. "Oh, the candour of you young people! Betty, almost any one who is young can look pretty if they have a nice smile and pretty manners, and wear their clothes well, but so few are pretty. I am afraid you and I can only hope to be reckoned in the former class," she said with that funny smile in her eyes.

"You and I-am I like you?"

"So people say."

I studied myself in the glass and came to the conclusion that people were wrong. I had the same colouring, the same shaped face, in fact I ought to have been like her, but something was lacking. That it was patience, the result of experience and of suffering, I did not know, and it was long before this knowledge came to me.

I turned away disappointed that I could not see the likeness to my Mother's beautiful face. However, she had said that almost any one who was young, with a nice smile and pretty manners, could look pretty,—if they wore their clothes well. From that day I lost

my total disregard of my appearance, I thought about my smile and my manners as things worthy of a new respect. I should like to look pretty, at least. My hair never went back into the tight plait which Mother had done for me with a view to neatness. I took it in hand myself, explaining that I was quite old enough to do my own hair, and thereafter it was allowed its natural fluffiness around my face. When one of the elder girls at school, who seemed as much above me as though she had been on a higher sphere said,

"Look at her pretty curls!" I was lifted into a state of exaltation and I fear that after that the fluffiness became a riot, for on several occasions Mother said,

"Betty, your hair does look untidy—haven't you brushed it?"

Although up to this time I had thought so little about my appearance or my clothes, I had suffered much from the fact that the latter were so much shabbier than those of the other girls, who were chiefly the daughters of moderately rich men, and when for my fifteenth birthday Aunt Jane sent the money for a complete new outfit, I begged that I might be allowed to wear it at school. Only one thing would have completed my pride—a watch or a bracelet which I could have shown around casually to set off the brags of the other girls about the valuable presents they had had for Christmas.

My pride did not last long—one of my classmates, the child of a wealthy cotton broker, asked me amid [48]

a crowd of others where I was going for the summer vacation.

"I'm not going anywhere," I answered honestly enough, knowing that holidays at the sea were not within reach of Mother's pocket, and then as I saw her smile I added haughtily, "I prefer to play at home."

In the face of their giggles and nods, the blood rushed to my face and I thought how desirable were those days of old when a cloud of fire might have come down from heaven and wiped them from the face of the earth. I especially hated the cause of my suffering, for I thought she was not a "nice" girl—she had told me a story which I did not understand, but her manner of sly relation conveying the fact that it was something "horrid," I had blushed furiously and instinctively shunned her thereafter.

Of course Aunt Jane had remonstrated with Mother for sending me to such an expensive school, for she had a tremendous struggle to pay the fees—"Why not send her to the Council Schools—they're good enough, and free."

But Mother had answered, "Betty will have to earn her living and she will need the best education I can give her. From her present school she will be able to get a scholarship to the University and after she has won a degree she will be ready for teaching—then, thank Heaven, she will be independent."

So my hours of freedom in the Brick-field began to be cut down, then to cease, and though for the most

part I worked willingly enough because I wanted to reach a state of independence as quickly as possible, there were times when the shouts and laughter of the others reached me and bred a discontent which found vent in my exclamation to Mother,

"I don't see why I have to work, Netty can play all she wants!"

"Nettie has a father, she probably won't have to earn a living—it is different with you," she answered sadly.

So, as my sixteenth birthday passed, I was still working hard for this scholarship. As soon as I was seventeen I could take the examination and then three years of university life. Only one thing marred my delight at this prospect—the thought of leaving my Mother. But after that I should be able to earn money and then the joy of helping her and repaying her for the struggles which I began to realise.

Then came one awful never-to-be-forgotten morning. Aunt Mary came into my room with a scared face.

"Betty, your Mother seems very ill—get a doctor quickly."

I fled into her room and was terrified by the look of suffering in her face. I raced like a mad thing for our old Doctor and waited outside the door for his verdict.

His face was very grave. "It means a serious operation, at once, Betty."

"Will she—will she—will it be all right?"
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"I hope so, but you had better see her now—but quietly, remember, no fuss."

She was in great pain but even then her thoughts were all for me.

"My little Betty," she said tenderly, "and there is so much I ought to tell you."

"But, darling, you will soon be better."

"I hope so-now kiss me and go."

I wanted to take her up and crush her to me to stifle the fear I felt, but he had told me to be quiet. It was my first real attempt at self-control. I kissed her dear mouth gently and left her.

Five hours later they told me she was dead.

Chapter Five

EVEN after eighteen years I cannot write about that awful time—the tears flow down my face, a pain rises in my heart, and I suffer again.

They marvelled then at my calm. How could they know the bitter despair and sullen resentment against Fate—against God, who had taken my one beloved away from me. How could they know the unavailing regret that now I should never be able to carry out those cherished plans for helping her—the remorse that I had not shown her more clearly how much I loved her. No patience, no resignation helped me in that time of hopelessness. I cried myself sick, but it was in my room with head muffled deep in the bedclothes, so that no one should hear me. My childhood was over.

Out of the grief and shock one definite feeling emerged. I must earn my living—at once, but how? There was only one way I could think of, which would be quick. The little money which Mother had been collecting for my college life would help to keep me for six months. In that time I would learn typing and shorthand!

Aunt Jane came to see me in a few days dressed in deep and stylish black. How I hated it! She looked [52]

in horrified wonder at my old blue serge, but something in my eyes warned her not to speak about it.

"Betty, I have come to offer you a home. Margaret wants to go to college next year and your Uncle and I are willing to send you too and bear expenses till you are able to begin teaching."

I was touched at this very generous offer, but deep in my heart was the horror of being dependent on her charity. I could not then resent anything she might say or do, but from a sense of honour would have to say "thank you" meekly for all I took. I should be a poor relation dependent on her kindness. Never! My Mother had struggled and worked to keep that independence she prized so greatly, and that same spirit was bred and deeply ingrained in me.

"Thank you very, very much, Aunt Jane—it's awfully good of you and Uncle—but I can't—I must earn a living at once."

"But how can you?" she asked, with slight irritation that I had not gulped up her generous offer at once.

"By learning typing and shorthand," I said calmly. It was a bomb in our midst. I think that if I had said, "by learning to steal," she could not have been more horror-struck.

"You can't do such a thing," she said, "you'll be on a level with shop girls—no one will know you. I won't have my niece doing such a thing."

My nerves were raw with suffering. I could not argue calmly.

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"Your niece, that is all you think of. If I were some stranger you would not care to what I descended, as you consider it. I think all work is honest, and there's a career in what I'm going to do. I am not going to be just a typist all my life—that is only a beginning. I'm going to be a business woman—some day I shall get a big job and you'll be proud of your niece."

No argument could shake my determination. When Aunt Jane realised that I was firm her anger flew into —"You are an ungrateful child. This comes from your poor Mother's ideas of independence and education—just ideals, and no earthly use."

I swallowed hard—"Don't dare say anything against her," I blazed, "she's worth a thousand of you—she's——" I swallowed again. A pain was rising from my heart, gripping my throat, burning my eyes. I fled out of the room so that this woman should not see my tears, and flinging myself on my bed, the sobs came tearing my thin body. "Oh, Mother, why did you leave me—only you understood—I am so alone."

Next day I wrote to Aunt Jane, thanking her again for her offer, and hoping that she would not think I was ungrateful for not accepting—this letter was a big concession, after what she had said.

But there was some excuse for her dislike for the work I had chosen. For in those days the influx of women to the business world had only just begun. Hitherto for a gentlewoman who showed no special talents, there was only one genteel opening—that of teaching. Each one of father's sisters had, at some

time in their lives, tried to escape from poverty by this door-two had kept a small private school. Mary had been a governess till in her later middle age one of her employers had left her a small annuity. Often enough the prospect was a meagre one, a hanging on as governess, ill-paid, of little count. It was so that I might avoid this fate that my Mother had bent all her efforts-so that I might have a college education and armed with a degree be fitted for the higher posts in the big schools which had practically ousted the small private ones. And because this idea of the woman in business was a comparatively new one, there were few recruits from the well-educated classes. The honour, esteem and high salary given to the educated business woman of to-day was denied the somewhat pathetic pioneers of twenty years ago.

I had some guidance in my choice of a school of shorthand and typewriting through a friend of Kitty's who had started in my path a year before and was making good progress in the office of some shipping merchants. In a week's time I had started, with a class of three. Soon, my mighty determination to learn well and quickly, carried me beyond them, and I think even the teacher was a little afraid of my energy and of my insistent, relentless eating-up of all she could teach me. It was unnatural in a girl of my age, but then she did not know the goal I had in view, or how pride spurred me on to a certain livelihood, before my small stock of money was exhausted.

Aunt Mary and her sister still lived on in the old

house and though I hated it now that my dear one had gone, there was no other way of living. By teaching music to a brother of Kitty's, I managed to eke out the little money I had. One thing I have not on my conscience—that my so-called teaching did him any harm for I believe that the most-learned professor could never have brought any music out of his stodgy soul or out of his fat, clumsy fingers.

After six months' hard work, and soon after my seventeenth birthday, I was pronounced efficient, and thus ready to make my way into the business world.

Efficient—the irony of it! My education had been helped by extensive reading of books of travel and adventure, romantic poetry and tales of knightly deeds,—the ordinary novel having little interest for me and being mostly unintelligible,—but the six months' training had given me no valuable knowledge of the commercial world and my ideas of it were about as vague and romantic as my ideas about Life.

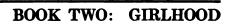
And these were romantic indeed. Although I did know that children were not found in gooseberry bushes, nor brought by the stork, of their creation and the mysteries of birth I had the haziest conception, and the meaning of sex and passion as the great forces which govern Life were unknown to me; thus when I heard Kitty's mother say that neither she nor her husband wanted the baby which was expected as they had five children already, I thought in wonder—"Then why ever do they have it?"—my vague imaginations on the subject supposing that the creation of a child

was a matter of calm and mutual agreement between the parents, and my shyness preventing me from asking for information. Though my supreme ignorance was lighted only here and there by vague and sketchy bits of knowledge given to me by a girl at school, to my intense embarrassment,-it was not, I think, unusual even in a girl of sixteen. I doubt if Nettie or Kitty were better informed, for when a Mother's pride in "the innocence" of her child pre-supposed the necessity of ignorance, it is small wonder that healthyminded and at the same time intensely shy young animals as we were shrunk from some of the girls at school, whom we classed as "not nice" because they were by no means so ignorant or disposed to conceal the fact. Because I had never been forbidden to read anything, I was dimly aware from the newspapers that there was misery and suffering and wrong-doing, but the people who sinned and suffered were of another world, it seemed to me. It was beyond my comprehension that such things could happen to any one I knew. And my romantic mind, full of stories of valour and bravery, instinctively turned away from anything unpleasant and horrid, so that the inner meaning of what I read never touched my consciousness or made an impression on my understanding. How different it would have been if Mother had not left me just as I was beginning Life.

Still I was efficient as far as the ordinary standards of the School went, and I was recommended as a stenographer to the head of a small engineering works

in Linesmoor. I interviewed his secretary, who had been with him six years, and who was leaving to be married, and she engaged me for a week on trial.

So I waited for the eventful day—either in the heights of anticipation, planning what I would do with fifteen shillings a week of my own, or in the depths of despair that I should never be able to do the work. On the whole, however, confidence prevailed and I soared to dizzy heights of success and wealth. Like a young knight in shining, new armour, I stood with lance a-tilt, ready to do battle with the world. If I could have foreseen the dints and stains on the armour, and the blows which were going to pierce through it, even through flesh and blood right to the heart, should I have started out so gaily and confidently, and with such appalling ignorance!



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BOOK TWO: GIRLHOOD

Chapter One

WHEN the eventful morning arrived, I awoke with a bad headache and a feeling as if my inside had left its usual resting place for ever. The tension of the past months had upset me and I would have paid almost any price to keep my aching head on the pillow. It seemed as though the Fates were against me that I, with my splendid health, should feel so wretched on this important day. Still, an excuse for absence on the first attempt would make too bad an impression, so breakfastless, and by a mighty effort of will-power, I set out.

With a beating heart I entered a little dark office. By the fireplace stood a man of about forty, tall, very handsome, in immaculate morning dress. And to this resplendent being I was introduced as the new typist—he was my "boss"! One youthful illusion quickly vanished in my involuntary astonishment—I had pictured the heads of firms as oldish men of fatherly and benign appearance.

Mr. Edwards was just going to Morningside, a town about fifteen miles away, after a big contract, and rattling off one letter to his secretary, he told

me to take another while she was typing. It was all about paint, and oil and lead,—simple things which I had seen in tins and pots, but which danced about this letter as mischievous demons bent on my destruction. His speed never moderated, and with a telegram hurtling at his secretary, he banged the door and was gone.

And out of the sorry mass of shorthand and confusion, I tried to make a letter. Lunch time went by and still I plodded on, far too miserable to eat, and too proud to make many appeals to the quiet girl who seemed so sure and competent and whom I envied with all my heart.

In the afternoon, the Works Manager gave me some letters. He was a bovine kind of man with a fresh, ruddy face and a slow, dragging method of dictation. He played with his watch chain as he hunted for words, and I could manage his work beautifully.

In the intervals, I returned to my letter, but in spite of all my strenuous efforts to make sense out of it, I am bound to confess that the meaning in places was a little subtle—not to say obscure. I went home and dreamed of that letter—a horrible medley of pots of paint were falling on me, pushed by a demon who bore a faint resemblance to Mr. Edwards.

Next day, I heard with a sinking heart that he would be back at noon, so in the morning I laid the letter on his desk and awaited my doom.

He began to read it. Soon a puzzled frown creased his brows. It deepened as he went on—"now you'll get

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the sack!" I thought. Presently, however, his face relaxed—could I believe my eyes? He was smiling, finally he burst into a laugh.

"Well, Miss Marchand, it's ingenious at any rate, though it's hardly my letter, is it?"

Thank Heaven for his sense of humour—it had saved me! As I stammered my apologies and told him that I had not taken any dictation quite so fast, he said,

"All right, I must have patience at first. I will tryand go slower."

Perhaps he did go slower, if he remembered, but to my struggling efforts there was no appreciable difference. How I got through those first few weeks, I do not know. They stand out as a period of continual nightmare. Every time I was asked to take letters, I had that sick feeling in my stomach that one gets at the dentist's, and I felt that my only relief would be for a contract to take Mr. Edwards to the uttermost parts of the earth so that I could breathe for a few weeks.

Fortunately he was away a good deal just then so that I was able to get some practice by taking occasional letters for the other men in the office, with whom I quickly made friends. They were an odd lot! Two men had married in the last year or so and each had a perfectly wonderful child, of whom he was never tired of talking. Another was fast going down the "other side of the hill" and hastening his end by periodic drinking bouts. He chewed tobacco and I

hated him. A younger man was living apart from his wife and soon I began to get stories of his troubles and of his attempts at reconciliation. I listened sympathetically, understanding about a quarter of what with lowered voice and illuminating eyebrows, he tried to tell me, but nevertheless feeling proud of being so grown-up and worldly.

It was the first time that such a life had touched Marriage was a very domestic institution in our community of Little Torbey, allowing of no twilight and half-shades of platonic friendships, or spirit-The men went into business at Linesual affinities. moor, travelling home in the same train, lunching together, discussing the state of their gardens and the bad season for lettuces. The women kept house, with or without a servant, looked after their children, indulged in an occasional visit to the theatre, or an afternoon party at each other's houses, and did their duty to their Church by attending a weekly sewing-bee at which they made garments for the poor. They were quiet, homely people, probably a little stodgy and dull, but eminently reliable and praiseworthy, attached to a definite status in life, finding pleasure in a small measure of attainment and a comfortable old age. Scandals were almost unknown and the very few mild ones were quickly lost to sight, for sinners did not flourish under the disapproving eyes of wives and mothers, to whom Linesmoor was naturally a wicked place because it was a large city, from which they thanked Heaven their husbands and sons were de-

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livered safely to them each evening. Torbey, our parent town, was more up to date, perhaps because it was more accessible to Linesmoor; it had social functions which were chronicled in the local newspaper, it was inclined to toss up its head at its rather dull and stodgy child, which in turn looked upon it as a not altogether desirable parent.

All around me were families which seemed to exist in a state of placid content from year to year; consequently marriage seemed to be a staid existence, automatically putting an end to hopes and fears and romantic visions. And thus I thrust its possibility for me to a very distant future when the finis of youthful amusements should not seem so dull and undesirable, when perhaps my quivering eagerness to taste Life to the full, to miss nothing, should have died down to the necessary placidity.

Perhaps it was my extreme unconsciousness which made the men in the office so good to me; perhaps with their man-sense they realised my innocence and with the chivalry which is in the hearts of ninety-nine men out of a hundred, respected it. Even Mr. Vincent, the man with the wife, or rather without her, only seemed to want a feminine ear into which to pour his troubles, and they were so vaguely and delicately put that, as I have said, I did not understand the need for so much sorrow. And to give him his further due, he would probably have been amazed to know how young I was in years, and just how much younger in knowledge of the world. With my hair up and a

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new dress which had quite a long skirt, I felt sure I must look at least thirty—which was the summit of extreme age!

The youngest clerk in the office was a boy of about twenty-two—his name John Woolcott. He and I became great friends, but while I admired his character intensely I could never quite overcome the wish that his outward appearance had been more romantic; it was difficult to remember that underneath his sandy hair and pale countenance was a fiery spirit and a keen sense of honour.

For the first six months I lived on the edge of a volcano, for as Mr. Edwards was by no means a patient man I daily expected him to tell me I must go. Perhaps it was through those old painful childish efforts at such things as skating that I had learned some of the grim earnestness and determination to stick until I was sacked, which appealed to his own indomitable spirit and tided me over the period of inevitable mistakes.

He came into the office one day with a very handsome young man whose supercilious smile touched my pride and made me desire to shine as a model of efficiency. After a few moments' heated discussion, Mr. Edwards said,

"All right, we'll send him a letter. Miss Marchand, are you ready?"

My heart beat as I quietly took up my pencil. Mr. Edwards sailed gaily away into a maze of technical terms, the other man interrupting and suggesting from

time to time. It was awful! In vain I struggled to get intelligent copy. I knew that it would take much patient digging to make sense out of the many erasions and additions. But that was not enough. When, short of breath, they stopped, the dictum came—"Now please read what you have."

With fiery cheeks and halting voice, I stumbled and stopped, hating my humiliation, desiring with all my heart that I might have been cool and capable before this strange young man. When I had been stammering for a few moments, Mr. Edwards said irritably,

"Draft it out first, and have it ready when I come back."

With a sigh of relief I went to the task in his absence, and free from flurry, found it less formidable than I had expected.

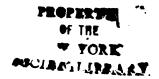
"Why couldn't you read it?" he asked when he saw the draft. "You have it all right."

"There were a thousand alterations, and I was too nervous," I said with emphasis, "if I halted over one word, I got flurried, and everything went and I could only think how foolish I must seem."

"You nervous!—well, I should never have thought it! I see I must give you plenty of practice in translating your notes verbally"—and his eyes twinkled.

When July hove in sight, it brought the week's holiday for which I had been longing—seven whole days of freedom—never a thought of this business of earning a living, only youth and playtime again, after al-

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most two years of work, work, work. That I had not saved enough money to go away mattered not a jot—there was our old playground and though the Hovey boys had gone to a school in Bruges for three years and Nettie would be at the seaside, there would still be five of our old gang—what a renewal of the old days we should have.

On the Monday morning I put my hair in the old pig-tail, found one of the old short skirts, and with joyful anticipation sallied forth.

Soon I began to ask myself, "What has happened?" We played the old games, and did the same things, but there was something lacking, or something there, which had not been. When had it departed, or when had it entered? I was definitely aware of this curious change in the atmosphere of careless camaradie when in swarming down a pole, I ripped my skirt, and examining the damage with rueful eyes, I heard a soft snicker behind me. Looking up quickly, I saw two of the boys turn away, whispering as they walked. Blood pounded into my cheeks till they burned with that painful sense of embarrassment which came from something "horrid." As the days passed, catch-words which I did not understand but which caused a sheepish laugh among the boys, poisoned that old-time spirit of keen competition and open comradeship-with its departure went the zest which had made our games so joyful.

The climax came on the last day of the holiday. We were playing "prisoners" once again. In our es[68]

cape Kitty and I came to the brook—the grave of so much shoe-leather—and were just preparing for the leap, Kitty an instant behind me, when George King caught up to us. But instead of grabbing her arm and yelling "prisoner," he put his arm round her and with a powerful spring helped her across, asking anxiously, "Did you get wet?"

It all happened in a moment, but my surprise was so great that it spoiled my jump and I found myself standing in the middle of the stream. "George King," I shouted wrathfully, "you're not playing fair."

He blushed till the colour flooded his thin face, and crept to the top of his ears and the roots of his hair.

"Aw, what's the matter," he answered sheepishly, "a fellow must help a girl."

"I think you're an idiot spoiling our game"—my indignation was heightened by my wet feet, but as I went home to remedy the damage, I thought—"A fellow must help a girl—why we used to be just playfellows!" Truly things were different, and I was glad to think that this make-believe week was over, and that I should be back at work again.

"Kitty," I said, as we sat one on each end of our see-saw that evening in the twilight, "something is different—what is it?"

She looked at me a little consciously, then answered, half-sadly, "I expect it's because we are growing up."

"Aren't things ever the same?" I wondered in a low voice.

"I suppose not—or rather it's just the way you look

at them which makes the difference—the things are probably the same."

Unconsciously our eyes wandered round the old field. In the gathering darkness it looked sad and grey. It had lost its charm with our passing child-hood.

"Ugh!" I shivered, "It's like a graveyard filled with ghosts. Let's go in."

The neighbourhood seemed strangely quiet after this, and I think "home" meant only a place where I ate and slept—it had never held my interest since the central figure had been taken away.

Chapter Two

Margaret. Her summer vacation had been spent with some college friends who lived in London and she had written me enthusiastically about the lovely time she was having—motor drives, picnics up the Thames, house parties and tennis. "I'm coming home for Christmas, and Mother is going to let me give a little dance, so you must be thinking of your dress."

My dress would certainly need a lot of thinking about, for the money for the material would have to be saved up penny by penny, and of course I should have to make it myself—I began to weave dreams about that dress weeks before I was able to buy it.

As soon as I heard Margaret was home, I sent her a note, asking her to come and have lunch with me in town. The thought of being able to pay for a lunch out of my own money gave me a glow of pride. To my astonishment Aunt Jane wrote me saying—"It is entirely unfitting for two young girls to be lunching alone in town; you had better come next week end to see Margaret, instead."

"What a funny idea!" I thought. "Why, I have lunch in town every day of my life—why shouldn't Margaret for once?" The chaperoned, sheltered state

of the wealthy girl's life was a thing unknown to me. Naturally, I led a more than usually free existence for a girl of my age. Often enough I worked till ten or eleven o'clock at night on some case connected with Mr. Edwards' consulting work, which he did in addition to his management of the works, and although on such occasions he always escorted me out of the somewhat unsavoury neighbourhood in which the works were situated. I had the long car ride, and the walk home through lonely lanes. When I could spare the money I went to a theatre or a concert or a lecture, and though at first Aunt Mary had suggested going with me to look after me, she could not say anything to my argument, "You can't look after me in the day time, and at night when I am working late. Why should you drag yourself to a thing to which you don't want to go? You can't tag a chaperone on to a business woman, Aunt Mary, you know!"

I looked forward to seeing Margaret again and went to "Woodlands" with a half-swaggering feeling of superiority at the thought that I was earning my living and she was not. But at the sight of her at Gateshead Station, I quickly bumped to earth. She was a head shorter than I and from the top of her beautifully dressed hair to the tips of her elegantly clad feet, she was a vision of radiant daintiness. Now I envied her pretty manners, her beautiful clothes, the little touches which showed wealth. My serviceable boots, my home-made dress, my big body formed an unenviable contrast. The same footman held the door

for me and I momentarily wondered if he remembered the last untoward occasion when I had been to Aunt Jane's. As I laughingly reminded Margaret of the occasion, she lamented the fact that she could not persuade her mother to go in for a motor instead of horses—it would be so much more up-to-date.

I was a little diffident in my greeting to Aunt Jane for I did not know whether she had forgiven me for my rejection of her offer. However, she kissed me kindly enough, but with an air of resignation—if such an extraordinary being were part of her family, she must make the best of the cross which Heaven had given her to bear—such was her attitude.

Margaret was all enthusiasm about the dance,—"Of course it will be quite an informal affair as I'm not out yet," she said, as I was making my simple preparations for dinner, "but a lot of college people are coming down for Christmas—and the Wilfreds, too."

"Who are they?"

"The people I stayed with in London. Bessie is my pal at college and Bertie, her only brother, is awfully clever and handsome—he's in his final year at Oxford, and of course they are awfully rich. His father is Sir Robert Wilfred, the shipowner." She looked a little self-conscious.

"Ha, ha! Margaret," I chaffed, "it's the only brother, is it—that is where the wind lies?"

"Hush," she whispered, "I like him, that's all, but Mother—well, I think Mother believes it would be a good match."

"Margaret, don't be pushed into anything," I said solemnly. "Stand out for your own wishes."

"It's not easy to stand out against Mother, Betty," she answered ruefully—and I could well believe it.

We talked over the dress I was going to make. "It must be quite simple, Betty, for you know you are getting quite a good figure."

"I am getting fat, I know that," I laughed.

"No, not too fat, you want a bit more curve with your height."

"I wish I were different, Margaret," broaching my secret longings, "I should like to be tall and sinuous, with black hair, and big, black, intent eyes, and my cheeks ought to be pale, and my lips red——"

"How awful! You'd look like a tragedy queen."
"But it would be so much more interesting than pink cheeks, and blue eyes, and light brown hair."

I enjoyed my visit, thoroughly appreciating the comfort and quiet elegance of Aunt Jane's well-managed house. It gave me a glimpse of a life very distant from the turmoil of the business world and the stress of trying to make a career, but I came to the conclusion that it might be rather a dull life, without enough adventure and excitement to satisfy me.

The dress grew slowly out of many long evenings' work. I found it was not easy to create when I was tired and would so much have preferred to read, but the success I had in view gave me courage. I put my whole energy and interest into the work and did my best to give it "the lines" Margaret had suggested.

It was a very pale blue, and I was elated at the result.

The dance night came at last and I was full of eager anticipation, but as luck would have it Mr. Edwards seemed bent on doing two days' work in one. Five o'clock came, then 5.30—my train went at 6.15—and still he lingered and dictated. I became so agitated that I could hardly type. Finally I blurted out,

"Do you mind if I finish these in the morning, as I am going to a dance to-night, and shall be late?"

"Of course not," he answered, "why didn't you tell me sooner. I hope you'll enjoy it."

"Thank you," I said briefly, and banging the cover on the machine, I flew. But in spite of running nearly all the way to the station, my train had gone—I should be too late for dinner. The next was not till 6.45 and so I bought some sandwiches, and kicking my heels on the hard seat, I waited impatiently, getting colder and more miserable.

When I arrived at Gateshead Station, of course there was no carriage to meet me for in my fuming I had never thought of telephoning that I should be on the next train, so I had to walk.

What a Cinderella I felt when the door opened, and in a gaily lighted room I could see the crowd of men and girls—the light from blazing logs shining on rippling waves of hair, on gleams of tulle and soft silk, on satin slippers. I almost ran away.

Margaret came out to greet me—she looked beautiful in a soft white dress, simple but very wonderful. "Oh, Betty, how late you are—come on quickly and

change and you can meet the people later. I've coaxed Jeannette to do your hair and hook up your dress, she's so clever—and there is a tray with something to eat!"

I felt a little frightened at the prospect of my Aunt's formidable maid helping me to dress, but she was already in the bed-room and holding up the dress against me, she looked at me through half-closed eyes —"Ah, yes, Mademoiselle, just lines."

"You see I was right, Betty," said Margaret, skipping away with a laugh.

Jeannette uncoiled my plentiful hair and brushing it back from my forehead in loose waves, she puffed it out a little over my ears and twisted it loosely low on my neck. Then her clever fingers turned to my dress, and in a few minutes I was transformed from a Cinderella into a quite presentable creature.

I felt very shy about going down stairs, but they were busy arranging dances, and I escaped much notice.

"Don't move, Betty," said Margaret, "I want to bring Bertie Wilfred and introduce him." She nod-ded towards a tall, slim young man, in beautifully fitting clothes, who was talking to Aunt Jane in a slow, drawling voice which matched his air of aloofness—if I had known more I might almost have called it superciliousness.

"What's he talk like that for, Margaret?" I whispered back.

"Like what?"

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"As if he were tired."

She laughed—"I suppose he caught it in Oxford—it's quite the thing."

He bowed with an easy grace as she introduced me—"my cousin, Betty Marchand, Bertie—you've often heard me speak of her"—and asked me for a dance. This new type of being almost took my breath away, for he was so different from William Hovey, or John Woolcott or the boys I knew.

Margaret brought up partners, one after another, jolly boys about my own age with whom I could laugh and talk on equal terms. It was different dancing with Bertie Wilfred, for he seemed so much older and at first I felt a little bit shy. After the dance, we rested under a beautiful palm in the conservatory which opened out of the hall—in and out of the plants and flowers, little coloured lights gleamed, and out of the half-lit darkness voices murmured softly here and there. The hard work-a-day world seemed very far away, and I, Betty Marchand, typist, seemed to have changed places with a girl in a pale blue dress, with quickening breath, attune to the glamour and happiness of this strange new world.

"How long are you staying here?" asked this languid young man. His tone, suggesting that he did not care whether I stayed for a week or a month, that he was just making conversation, nettled me.

"Till exactly thirteen and a half minutes past eight o'clock to-morrow morning," I answered promptly.

He sat up. "I beg your pardon, what did you say?"

"I said till thirteen and a half minutes past eight o'clock to-morrow morning—if indeed Aunt Jane will allow her precious James to risk his life in such early morning air—if she won't, I am afraid I shall only be staying till thirteen and a half minutes to eight."

He looked at me puzzled, then laughed, "Oh, I see, you are just joking."

"Joking!" I retorted, "you don't suppose it is a joking matter to turn out at that unearthly hour after a dance, do you?"

"But you don't really have to go so early?" and as I nodded, "whatever for?"

"Because I'm a business woman."

"You're what?"

"A business woman—a secretary, typist, whatever you like to call it, I'm earning my living," I answered with a light laugh to hide my pride. "Is it so wonderful?"

"I should say it is. I am years older than you and I haven't hardly begun to think of it."

"Well, don't you think it is time you did?"

Amusement gleamed in his lazy dark eyes. "I suppose it is, but the Governor does not seem in any hurry for me to begin, and so I can assure you I am not,—though I am doing some reading for the Bar."

"Ah, you see you have a father—I haven't—any one." I could not quite keep the quiver out of my voice which the thought of my Mother always brought.

"Poor little girl," he said softly, "what a shame! [78]

Well, if I ever do earn my living and want the aid of a secretary, will you come and help?"

"Of course I will," I answered, and both laughing we shook hands and called it a bargain. "The next dance is beginning, let's go back."

And then in a moment my happiness was stripped from me. Margaret was standing in the doorway, Bessie Wilfred by her side. I heard Margaret's bright voice, "Yes, Betty is very clever, why she made that dress all by herself-isn't it pretty?" and the quiet drawling reply, "Oh, yes, quite pretty, but every one would know it was home-made"-Oh, those cruel words, stabbing right through my vanity, and making those hours when I had been so tired seem all wasted effort. Like a flash the day when I had torn my new dress came into my memory, and I thought that so my little Mother must have felt when she saw her hours of loving work destroyed in a minute—though then the deed had been thoughtless, and not cruel like this.

Bertie Wilfred looked uncomfortable, but too proud to show that I cared, I deliberately leaned on his arm and laughed up into his face, as we passed his sister. She had spoiled the evening for me, for now my dress took all my thoughts and "home-made" seemed written all over me for every one to read. I was glad when it was over.

It seemed that I had been asleep for about five minutes, and then only in a fitful doze, when some one

knocked at my door, and a tired maid said, "It's time to get up, Miss Marchand."

Time to get up! Oh, how I hated being a business woman then—how I longed to stay in the warm bed, and sleep and sleep and sleep. The others would get up just when they pleased, and there would be a jolly breakfast in the daylight. The gas threw a weary "morning-after" light on my lonely breakfast. It was snowing and as I reached the office tired and cold, I concluded that decidedly a business woman's life was not all roses.

Towards three o'clock in the afternoon, I further concluded that dances were not conducive to good work. The voice of the works-manager was at all times somnambulent, but to-day I frankly dozed through his dictation, my head drooping till with a violent jolt I drew upright again and wondered, with mounting colour, whether he had noticed. It was only the fact that his letters varied in a very small degree that enabled me to transcribe the jolted notes I took—literally jolted, for every now and then they stopped abruptly and a spidery web across the page showed where momentary slumber had overtaken me.

As my intense desire to succeed was always in the background of my thoughts, I decided then and there that there must not be many dances and "two o'clock evenings," but that I had better take most of my pleasure in sport which cleared my brain and helped me forward.

Chapter Three

THINK the thing out of which I got most amusement in the office was the constant succession of office boys. I often laughed as I thought how these mites of humanity set the whole stately paraphernalia of an office routine at defiance. Why should they care—they could always get another job—they were young, life had no worries, the future was a vague thing which did not seem to matter. After much effort we finally got a boy called John who seemed like a rose amid the receding vista of thorns. He spoke well, had a quiet manner and was unusually neat, his fat wholesome face shining under sleek dark hair. He was a nice boy and we became good friends. For the moment it seemed that he had only one vicebut this was almost enough to damn him in my eyes so much did I dislike the effect, for morning after morning, around his head floated an aroma which announced his coming—onions! One morning when the pungent smell was more powerful than usual, I tackled him on the subject, "John, whatever do you eat for breakfast?"

He looked at me in amazement—"We sometimes have porridge, and sometimes bacon, and——"

"Yes, yes," I interrupted, "but there's something

else, day after day, which contains immeasurably powerful onions."

He blushed and smiled with the dimples appearing in his fat cheeks—"Oh, onions, yes, miss, I'm powerful fond of pickled onions."

For breakfast—ye gods! "Well, John, there are only two solutions—either you will have to give up eating onions for breakfast, or when you speak to me, you must keep your head turned over your shoulder."

I was more than half joking and was rather taken aback when a few mornings later he said with a sheepish grin, "I've given up the onions, miss."

"You're my benefactor, thank you, John."

I suppose I was not more than three years older than he, but unconsciously I looked upon him as a mere child and treated him as such-kindly, jokingly, and with a certain amount of freedom, as I would any school-boy. But gradually to my increasing embarrassment, I began to realise that there was something more than a boyish admiration on his part. If I spoke sharply, he looked at me with hurt grown-up eyes; little paper bags of candy were presented to me with the embarrassment and ardour of a real beau; he lingered near my chair on one pretext or another. Certainly it was an advantage to have an office boy who carried out your requests, who could be trusted to do exactly as you told him-but! I was too young to be touched by the pathos of his admiration, my only thought was of the absurdity of it; it hurt my dignity and embarrassed me. I began to retreat from my easy

jolly manner, hardening my heart against the puzzled hurt in his eyes and his quiet voice.

Yet it was indirectly to him that I owed my next rise in salary. The Chief had been out in the works all one morning and had come in from lunch to try and crowd a whole day's work into the few remaining hours. At 5.15 he would have to leave for an appointment. I knew that the interview was connected with a new process of rubber-making, in which the Chief was interested and over which he was immensely enthusiastic, for if it did all that was claimed, there would be a lot of money in it. Five o'clock came and as I heard the buzzer, I reminded him of his appointment.

"Bless me!" he exclaimed as he jumped up—"how time does fly," and thrusting an arm into his overcoat he hurled a few directions at me and was gone.

I breathed a sigh of relief, began to straighten the medley he had left on his desk—and there was the sample of rubber on which the whole interview depended! He would be furious at his forgetfulness. Could I do anything? I had heard him say over the telephone—"You better come along too—yes—I'm going to see Harding to-night. All right, I'll meet you at the station." And that was all I knew. I looked in the telephone book, found there were three Hardings, one living at Wesley, a small place about ten miles out on the North Western track, the others in Linesmoor. It must be the first one, otherwise why meet at the station?

I went out to John and breathlessly explained the situation—"Will you go to the Exchange Station, find out where the trains to Wesley go from—there's one at 5.30, another at six. See if you can find Mr. Edwards on the station or on the train. You must find him, he's forgotten this sample, and it's most important."

His intelligent eyes brightened and snatching his cap he said, "All right, I'll find him."

I explained to Mr. Vincent where he had gone and then settled down to wait for news. Six o'clock came, six-thirty—soon after the half-hour he came back, breathless but radiant. "I found the boss, he was just getting on the train."

"Good for you, what did he say?"

"He didn't say anything, except 'Oh thank you, all right.'"

I was disappointed, and scornful of my excited activity which had perhaps been quite unnecessary. And I felt somehow humiliated that I had used John's willingness to help me.

But next morning Mr. Edwards greeted me with a beaming smile and said genially, "I'm going to give you a rise. I've been thinking about it for some time—last night settled it."

As I stammered my unexpected thanks, he added, "It was jolly smart of you; how did you find me?"

And when I had explained he laughed and said, "Quite a Sherlock Holmes. It saved my face, for I should have looked a fool without the sample —I'd

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just discovered it was missing as the boy came up."

"Yes, John helped me."

"John?"

"The office-boy."

"Oh, he did." But his expression had become absent-minded and as he turned to his desk, I smiled. To him office boys were merely machines, who came at the sound of a bell, answered promptly "Yes, sir" and were called "Boy!" I doubt if he knew when we had a new one.

My work that day was coloured by a rosy light. I was making good and I was almost as much delighted by his praise as I was by the fuller envelope which reached me the next pay-day. Though indeed it was very welcome and made me feel that I was on the way to wealth.

Chapter Four

A FEW days after Margaret's dance I was walking down Church Street on my way to lunch, when a machine whizzed past me, and then, with a grinding of brakes, pulled up a few yards ahead. Its driver turned and waved a hand and to my surprise I saw Bertie Wilfred.

"Well, how did the 'morning-after' come off?" he said with his lazy smile. "I nearly got up to see you off!"

"Nearly is right! It was about as horrid as possible," I answered, laughing heartily at the recollection of my discomfort, "tired maids, a weary gas-light, snow, and a still more weary typist, ugh! Are you still staying at Aunt Jane's?"

"Yes, I've promised for another week or so. I came into town this morning to try and find some excitement, it's rather boring with that lot of larky kids."

"Gracious, you might be a hundred."

"Well, there's a good deal of difference between nineteen and twenty-three, as you will find out, and sometimes I feel a hundred. But what are you doing in this part of the town?"

"I have to come up for lunch—there's no place down by the works."

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"I suppose I shall have to eat too—what do you say if you take pity on my loneliness and have lunch with me?"

"All right, but I only have an hour—less now," as I looked at a clock—"only fifty minutes."

"Heavens, do they make you eat by clockwork, as well as work—what a life! Jump in and we'll go to the Central, that's about the best place in this forsaken town."

"Yes, I like that," I chattered, "I had lunch there with Mr. Edwards the other day."

He looked at me a little queerly. "Mr. Edwards was honoured."

"Oh, he wouldn't think so," I laughed. "He's my boss. I took notes at a meeting there and he always asks me to feed when I'm far away from my usual bun-and-milk shop."

I loved the softness and comfort of the place, the quiet attentive waiters, the flowers—it was so different from snatching a bite, with clattering dishes around me, and strident voices.

"Would you like some 'fizz'?" said Bertie Wilfred. "Of course I would—what is it, anyway?"

He burst out laughing—"What a child you are! Champagne."

"Lovely! I've never tasted it, and I'd like to."

I wanted to taste everything, to try everything. The only thing I was afraid of was that I might miss anything in this exhilarating game I called "Life."

The sharp exuberance of the thing delighted me. "Yes, it's awfully nice."

I was hungry and enjoyed eating as much as I could, instead of as much as I could pay for. And I was proud of my cavalier. The only fault was that I had to hurry and I wished that I had had on my new suit.

"I wonder if Mrs. March would allow me to take you and Margaret to a matinée—will you come if I ask her?"

"You know I can't come to matinées."

"But can't you get a holiday some afternoon?"

"I don't approve of asking for holidays," I answered primly, "it's not business-like."

"Hoighty-toighty!" he laughed. "Well, what about a Saturday?"

"I play hockey on Saturdays."

"But can't you give that up for once?"

I opened my eyes. "Give up hockey, of course I couldn't, it would spoil the team, and then we might lose. We haven't lost a match this season."

He looked thoughtful—"I don't think Aunt Jane would allow me to take you both to an evening performance."

"Aunt Jane has nothing to do with allowing me," I said haughtily. "I often go alone—or not, as it happens." But the twinkle in my eye met no response in his. He was looking at me with a keen though puzzled air.

"You'll come then, say next Thursday?" [88]

"Yes, thank you, and you can call for me and meet Aunt Mary. She's rather a dear, not a bit like Aunt Jane."

He looked relieved. "Yes, that will be better, I'll call for you and meet Aunt Mary—then it will be all right."

I drank the last drop of the delicious coffee, and with a shock, saw that it was nearly two o'clock, and got up quickly.

A very grand lady was coming up the room and as she turned her head in my direction I saw that it was Aunt Jane.

"Hello, Aunt Jane!" I called gaily. But her look froze the words on my lips. Her eyes swept over the table, then over me.

With an air which she tried to make playful but which sounded the reverse, she said, "So this is your business, Mr. Wilfred?"

He looked decidedly uncomfortable. "Oh, no, I met Miss Marchand quite casually and as she was going for lunch and so was I—why we joined forces."

"I see!" she said smiling—such a smile. "Betty, I want to speak to you," and drawing me on one side, she said, in a suppressed tone of fury,

"You ought to be ashamed of lunching in a place like this alone with a man you have only just met, and drinking champagne too, it's enough to make your mother turn in her grave—such behaviour!"

That terrible anger which had made me a whirlwind of fury when I was a child crept through my

veins. I made a tremendous effort at the control which I was gradually learning was necessary as I grew older, but the red haze of anger seemed to slowly turn into a lump of ice, and I grew sick and trembling and cold. I could hardly speak, and it was a very low uncertain voice which said,

"My Mother knows all I do, and I've done nothing to be ashamed of. How dare you interfere with me; you know it's only because you want Mr. Wilfred to marry Margaret!"

Leaving her speechless at my impertinence, I walked out with my head in the air. "I'm awfully sorry," said Bertie Wilfred, in quite a humble voice. "Now I suppose the theatre is off?"

"Not at all, I shall expect you at 7.30. Thank you for taking me to lunch. Good-bye." I strode off. I did not want to go to the theatre for I was furious with him as the partly innocent cause of my Aunt's tirade, but I was not going to let her interfere. This man and his horrid sister were always bringing me mortification. In future I would have nothing to do with them, but would stick to honest John Woolcott—when I went out with him nothing like this happened. For John and I had several times occupied two humble seats up in "the Gods," after first partaking of a meal that was filling if not dainty. He was such a respectful cavalier, treating me as though I were a princess, and flattering my vanity. For the moment, and in my anger, his faithful but unexciting interest

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a it. :5! in me contrasted favourably with Bertie's easy man-ofthe-world manner. But in my sub-consciousness I knew from experience that it was doubtful whether such contrast would long continue in the same light.

Chapter Five

IN the background of my thoughts was always the longing for my Mother. Youth, vitality, a naturally cheerful disposition and that intense alertness to the romantic possibilities of Life had conquered my first sullen despair and the emptiness which followed. But I longed for her to be back with me; when I received my raise, my first thought was how splendid it would have been if I could have carried the news to her, if I could have felt that I was beginning to 'repay her for all she had done for me. Yet I did not feel that she had left me entirely. When I told Aunt Jane that Mother knew all that I did, I meant it literally, for I had a keen sense of her nearness to me which was all the more extraordinary because I was far from being of a religious frame of mind-indeed there were times when I was worried by my lack of mental and emotional touch with that Highest Being of whose love she had taught me. This feeling that she was near me was not wholly spiritual, it was rather as if she had gone on a journey to another country and yet was able to see what I was doing and know my thoughts. Perhaps it was that my inner being felt-knew-that such love could not die, could not just be snuffed out with the cessation of breath. I felt that it was still

watching me, caring for me; sometimes when the sun shone and soft white clouds flecked the blue sky, their gentle beauty seemed to gradually dawn into her smile and her love seemed to hold and envelop me until I could almost feel her arms. How I longed for the actual reality of her touch! But in spite of the lack of it, she still held sway over my thoughts and actions, the memory of her love helping me to try and live up to her ideals. Thus I specially resented Aunt Jane's implication that in lunching with Bertie Wilfred I was doing anything shameful; perhaps when my anger had simmered down, I felt only a youthful pride in my freedom from her stupid conventions.

By the time Thursday came, I had quite forgotten my annoyance, and when Bertie called to take me to the theatre, I felt a glow of pride in his appearance. As I stepped into the taxi-cab which was slowly beginning to oust the old four-wheeler, I felt that my happiness was complete—truly I was "seeing Life."

The play was "The Sign of the Cross." It was the first I had ever seen from a red plush chair, sitting in comfortable luxuriance and surrounded by immaculately dressed men and women. Even on a hard wooden seat in the gallery I lost myself in every play I saw—rejoiced, or sorrowed with the heroine, admired the manly virtues of the hero, and longed with all my heart that I could follow the actors, after the curtain had gone down, into the wonderful romantic world in which they lived. Oh, the pleasure of watching something so real, of living for the time being in what I

heard and felt and saw—how more than wonderful did this emotional play seem to me on this night, already surrounded by a happy haze of glamour and feeling proud of my handsome and well-bred escort.

When the curtain went down for the last time, the tears were trickling down my cheeks over the sorrows of Mercia and ashamed of letting Bertie see how much I was affected, I hastily dabbed my eyes before the lights went up.

"Did you like it?" he asked, and I was amazed at his casual tone and by the fact that he did not seem in the least thrilled.

"It was wonderful."

"Shall we have a bite of supper at the Central before going home?"

My eyes sparkled at the thought of so completely defying Aunt Jane's conception of what was proper. "It would be fun," I answered.

But when we went into the gaily lighted room I was almost sorry I had come. I looked ruefully at my simple dress, and still more simple wrap; in the glittering array of the women's toilettes, they seemed to shriek aloud by their very quietness. At the next table to us a woman sat, alone. I could hardly keep my eyes away from her, from her white skin, her wonderful dress, and still more the rippling mass of the wrap thrown back against her chair—its gleam of satin and fur and lovely colours fascinated me; for a moment I had a vision of myself so clothed, then I

blushed and smiled for I should never have had the courage to wear so little dress.

"Isn't she beautiful," I whispered, then excitedly, "Bertie, do you know her, I thought she smiled at you?"

"I do not," he said decidedly; "look here, if we want something to eat before they close, we'll have to choose quickly."

His quick tone made me turn to the business in hand, and soon after the vision of beauty I had so much envied went out. Nothing marred the pleasure of that evening. The drive home in the moonlight intensified the feeling of romance which surrounded me and when I thanked Bertie Wilfred for "giving me such a jolly time," I felt how inadequate my words were to express the depth of my happiness.

I met him several times before he went back to London, and when I heard from Margaret that she was spending the Easter vacation with the Wilfreds, I envied her for the jolly time she would have under the guidance of the fascinating Mr. Wilfred. And when in the middle of a warm June she wrote me that they were having a pretty good time at college with tennis and swimming and boating—and not too much work—I began to feel that the four walls of an office were stifling, and to long for the two weeks' vacation which were due to me in another month.

How many evenings I spent poring over guide books and trying to decide where to go! What entrancing visions opened! Even the thought of my

ability to pay for a holiday was thrilling. Finally I decided that the Isle of Man was the ideal place and arranged that Kitty should come with me. Her mother's consent had only been won to the scheme after much argument and because she thought Kitty was looking tired and thin and perhaps the keen air might blow some colour into her cheeks.

I think the anticipation of that holiday brought us as much pleasure as the realisation—the dresses we made, the wonderful bathing suits, the veils and scarfs we bought.

"Nothing to do for two whole weeks!" I said to Kitty joyfully as we set out, "no effort needed—for two whole weeks I can forget I have a career to make and just be a girl with nothing to do."

"I envy you your business, sometimes," said she, rather dejectedly, "I get tired of inefficient maids and children and cooking."

"But you can always get away for an afternoon when you want to—you're not tied down to your job—it's that which makes it hard."

My spirits fell to zero as we made the sea-trip which was not kind to me, for though I loved the sea, I was a bad sailor. But when we had changed and dined, how beautiful the little place looked in the soft twilight. Right and left the dark cliffs curved out into the Ocean, and below our feet, a long way below, we could just distinguish the line of yellow sand where it met the playful, lapping water. Lights twinkled in the dusk. I grasped Kitty's hand, "It's just like

fairyland," I whispered, seeing endless possibilities of that romantic adventure which always lay just beyond reach.

We bathed, and boated, walked and climbed, went for picnics and fishing parties in the daytime; in the evening there were walks in the soft darkness with the jolly boys we met, lowered voices, clasped hands, a stolen kiss—romance and the glamour of youth, of the beginning of Life. And later, gay, laughing parties in the one restaurant which the little fishing place boasted, where we drank coffee which might well have been nectar so flavoured was it by the spirit of happiness.

I came back with sunburnt cheeks and new energy. Besides tasting the pleasure of absolute freedom, I glimpsed the heady triumph of a girl's power which came from the interest of one of these tall strong boys—that he should wish to talk with you, to help you carefully into a boat, to spread a coat for you to sit upon—yet when softened by this interest I looked out into the deep blue darkness and was happy, I was more conscious of the vague and romantic possibilities which it showed me than of the actual figure by my side, for though I felt the touch of his hand, there was another part of me, aloof, unconsenting, the chrysalis of the butterfly who would only come to life at the call of that unknown one.

I was greeted at the office by Mr. Edwards' cheery smile, and his genial "Thank goodness you're back, I'm just about fed up with that substitute of yours," gave

me the feeling that I had indeed become an expert and that I might venture to thank him for his patience with me at first—"I often wonder how you put up with me!"

His eyes twinkled, "You were pretty awful, weren't you? Well, I knew there was something in you if I could only stick out the time till it appeared."

In the fifteen months which had gone by, I had become a fairly efficient secretary with a varied experience of work, one raise in salary and the prospect of another at the half-year. I nearly always went with my Chief to the various investigations he made as Consulting Engineer, and so I saw the inside of oil factories, tin works, flour mills, rope works, and learned to take notes anywhere—at meetings, or on a piece of machinery, a drum of oil, even against a bare wall.

I think Mr. Edwards was the most amazingly unself-conscious man I have ever met. He went his own way without a single thought of how his actions looked to any one. One day we made the journey to a small town the other side of Linesmoor, to the scene of a transcar accident, where one had been derailed. We walked up and down the main street till it seemed as though the very stones would recognise our footsteps. Suddenly the Chief stopped and with the light of inspiration in his eye, said,

"I've got it, I believe—just catch hold of the other end of this tape."

"And what shall I do with it?" I asked coldly.
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"Do-why take it to the other side of the road, of course, I want to measure the track here."

This was really too much, I thought, hating anything which would make people stare, and stare they would at the sight of a young woman stooping down in the road, and holding a steel tape across a public thoroughfare. However, his unconsciousness of there being anything unusual was complete, and with head up, I took it and went.

"Thank goodness," I thought, "we are out of Linesmoor, and no one will know me here."

Presently there was a sharp toot of a horn,—I looked round hastily and found myself gazing into the astonished eyes of Bertie Wilfred.

I blushed crimson. It seemed as though he were doomed to mortify me.

"Hello! What are you doing here?"

"Holding a tape," I glared; "if you look along it, you'll see my boss."

He began to laugh—"There's nothing to laugh at, vou'd better go on."

But I was too late—with a cheery "I've got it, I thought I was right," up came Mr. Edwards, winding the tape as he walked. "Hello, I see you've met a friend."

"Yes, Mr. Edwards, this is Mr. Wilfred, a friend of my cousin's," I said with as much dignity as I could.

He beamed and shook hands with his usual hearti-"Well, now we've finished, let's go and get

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some dinner. Perhaps you'll come too, Mr. Wilfred, if you are not in a hurry, and then you can run us in to Linesmoor, I have to go back to the office." The Chief had a way of press-ganging everybody into his service, and the funny thing was that they did not seem to mind it.

Bertie Wilfred looked rather uncertainly at me. Then, "I shall be delighted," he said. "I was on my way to 'Woodlands,' Miss Marchand. My sister has been staying there, and she suggested that I might drive up and take her home, so I'm going for the week end."

In the light and comfort of the old-fashioned rambling hotel, I quickly forgot my annoyance and enjoyed the good food and the light wine with a healthy appetite. Mr. Edwards talked with his usual fluency. but Bertie Wilfred seemed rather quiet, and his brief, drawling replies were disappointing. But then my Chief could easily have kept up a conversation with a dumb man, so the other's lack of it did not disturb him, and delighted with his solution of the accident, he sparkled with his gay bonhomie. We drove him to the office, and Bertie offered to take me home. was a beautiful night in the early autumn, and I was sorry the journey was not twice as long. I did not want to talk, I just wanted to sit and feel the rush of air and see the flying lights as we skimmed along the road.

"It must be gorgeous to own a machine," I said impulsively.

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Bertie Wilfred did not answer, but a moment later in a constrained tone, he said, "I thought you said Mr. Edwards was an old man——"

"I'm sure I never said anything about his age, though he isn't very young,—he must be at least forty—but why?"

"Oh, nothing—does Aunt Mary know you go out to dinner with him?"

I opened my eyes—"Why, of course," then something in his would-be jocular tone jarring, "but I don't see that it matters to you."

"No, no, I shouldn't have spoken," he said quickly, "please forget it."

"Mr. Edwards is a very nice man and he's awfully good to me."

He muttered something about it not being hard to be good to a pretty girl—again that jarring note.

"What do you mean?" I asked irritably, "I wish you would speak out, I don't like hints."

His eyes were alight. "I mean this, you're only eighteen. Edwards is a man—not bad-looking," he added grudgingly, "and you're working together, dining together—what's to prevent him falling in love with you?"

I was too amused to be angry. "What a ridiculous idea," I said laughing. "Why, he's my boss, and he's quite old—and he's married." To me he was hardly a man, he was just a being, quite outside my consciousness. "I think you're awfully funny."

He looked haughty.

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"I almost wish I could fall in love," I went on, "just to see what it's like. I haven't really cared for any one since my Mother died."

"You're quite frank about it," he answered coldly.
"Hey, hey," I laughed, "didn't I put my foot in it!
The fact is you're spoiled. I suppose you think every girl ought to be in love with you. Not me, it would be too much like King Cophetua and the Beggarmaid."

"Don't talk like that!" he said in a savage tone.

I was too surprised to speak. I chaffed him so often and usually he just laughed in his easy, lazy way. We did not speak for the rest of the way home and parted with some constraint.

As I went to bed, our conversation flitted through my mind—could it be that he was a little jealous? My girlish vanity thrilled at the thought and I slept with the happy feeling that Life was becoming very interesting and complicated and Romance seemed to be coming nearer and nearer.

HAD been in business for more than two years when I saw William Hovey again. I was hurrying out of the house on my way to tennis, when I met a tall, well-built young man, who smiled all over his

broad honest face as he said,
"Don't you know me, Betty?"

I looked again and exclaimed, "William! No I didn't recognise you just for a second, you've altered so much. When did you come home, what are you doing—in fact tell me all about yourself!"

He told me of the school in Belgium, and of the last six months which he had spent in travelling—"Now I'm home for good. I have a job in the Governor's office. He wants me to take up the responsibility, gradually of course."

"You must join our tennis club. Kitty belongs, too. In fact why not come along now. George King's a member, and you'll know several of the other boys. I am glad you are back, William, what good old times we used to have! We'll give Kitty a surprise."

She was putting on her tennis shoes in the pavilion and grasping her arm, I said, "Guess who I've got outside?"

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"I don't know," she answered, with no particular interest.

"It's William Hovey," I whispered loudly in her ear. Her head bent still further over the lace she was tying and when she stood up, her usually pale face was flooded with colour. "Why, Kitty, what lovely roses to-day!"

"It's just with stooping," she said quietly, and when we went out together, I noticed that it had faded, and that she was even paler than usual. She greeted William with her quiet shy manner, and I was disappointed that she did not show more interest in his return. I was delighted. I had a real affection for him and looked forward to being pals once more, like the old days.

We had a lovely summer—evenings at tennis and walks home in the twilight, picnics on the River, tea parties on Saturday afternoons—Kitty and William and I, and George King, who now quite evidently adored Kitty. Everybody gently chaffed her about him, for he followed her about with an almost dog-like devotion.

"Kitty," I laughed one day, "why don't you make that poor boy happy, he's positively pining away!"

She turned upon me with a concentrated fury in her white face which left me speechless.

"You blind fool—don't ever mention George King's name to me again!"

Why was I blind, and what in the name of goodness had there been in my innocent remark to cause such [104]

rage? However, her manner would not permit of any renewal of the subject, and gradually there grew up a rather marked air of constraint between us. William and I saw each other nearly every day, and we often lunched together at my bun-and-milk shop, on an equal basis, for as I said—"There's no use your paying for my lunch when I have to pay for it anyway—and some day you shall take me out to a real spread."

"All right, we'll make it a celebration, Betty," he answered quite solemnly.

It became evident that there would be no summer vacation with Kitty that year, and as Margaret had asked me to stay with her, I supposed that Aunt Jane had apparently agreed to forget our unfortunate meeting and went. I found Bertie and his sister there. This time I met her on more equal grounds for I had learned the trick of hiding my feelings in a smile, and I had also learned self-confidence in my appearance and my clothes, which, with a further rise in salary, had been added to and improved. Some of Margaret's college friends came up a few days later, and we played tennis, and went for long drives, and walked in the pretty country lanes, and I enjoyed the lazy peace to the fullest extent. Somehow it generally seemed as though Bertie and I were together in our parties, but as I told myself he knew me better than the other girls, and as Margaret was hostess, she, of course, had more duties.

When the last day of my holiday came, I was genu-[105]

inely sorry. After dinner, when we had all strolled out onto the lawn, Bertie whispered, "Come for a ride in my machine, I have some news I want to tell you."

"But we can't leave the others," I hesitated.

"Oh, if we wander off, they'll never notice, do come, I want to talk to you."

It was a lovely evening and the thought of riding in his speedy little car tempted me. A soft gentle breeze had sprung up, and the country seemed to be resting after the heat of the day. I gave myself up to the beauty of the scene and the joy of rushing through the warm air.

"Well, what's the news?"

"I'm going to work."

"Bravo!" I cried, "and why this sudden energy?"
"You started it; I've felt such a slacker loafing my
time away, while you were working like a little slave—
it ought to be the other way round at least."

I felt proud of my influence. "I think you will be glad—what are you going to do?"

"Study for the bar in real earnest. I'm not going to take any holidays till I'm through, so maybe I shan't see you for a long time. Then I'll come for congratulations, I hope."

"If you haven't forgotten me," I said laughing.

"I won't forget you, Betty," he answered solemnly.

"No, I expect you'll cuss me now and then when you are poring over dry law books with a damp towel around your head, that is if it is really I who

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started you. However, I'll risk that for the pleasure of feeling I have done something."

We had come to a lane where beautiful old trees arched overhead. He stopped the machine—"Let's get out and walk a little way over those fields."

"Then it's good-bye for a time," I said softly. His arm was around me as we sauntered slowly on; my happy mood, just tinged with a vague sadness at the thought of parting, harmonising with the fading light.

"Yes, for a time. Won't you wish me luck?"

"With all my heart, I do!" I answered earnestly, giving him my hand. He drew me to him and kissed me.

"Then it's only au revoir, little Betty."

Oh, Bertie, if you had made me promise to marry you then, should I have escaped all that followed? I doubt it, perhaps even then it was written in the Book of Fates, and all my promises would not have held me fast.

In the months that followed all my vague dreams were centred in him. The future was filled with the romantic thought of his laying the honours he would win, his wealth, himself at my feet. It was still a dim and distant future, for I was not tired of freedom, I did not wish for that finite thing called Marriage to put an end to all the exciting possibilities—but, of course, it would have to come some day and Bertie's interest made me glow; he was so handsome, so rich,

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I liked him so much—I was surely in love with him? Then it seemed as though my Mother's voice said softly, "Don't be dazzled, Betty dear, be very sure!" If I had known!

The rest of the summer passed all too quickly. Towards the end of it, William Hovey suggested a last picnic on the river-"a grand finale till next year" as he put it.

"All right," I answered gaily, "I'll bring the grub." It was a lovely Saturday towards the middle of September, when the trees were throwing out suggestions of their autumn tints. With my usual energy I insisted on rowing all the way to the pretty backwater where we were going to moor the boat and have

I enjoyed every minute of it and as the sun went down and the touch of frost in the evening air made me shiver in my thin dress, I said reluctantly, "Well, I suppose we must be going back."

"I want to talk to you first, Betty." I had turned round to get my sweater, but something unusual in his voice made me stop. I looked at him and was astonished. His face had lost its smiling good humour, it looked set and intensely solemn. "You must know I love vou."

"Love me!" I said amazed.

Love me—the thing appalled me. Like a flash I understood why Kitty hated me. She loved William! What a muddle. Truly I had been blind, but it was

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not because my girlish vanity had not dwelt on the possibility of some one being in love with me—there was Bertie Wilfred, for instance—but William, who was like a brother, who had grown up with me, who had even blacked my eye.

"But you can't love me, William, how can you possibly love a girl who is just a pal—it's impossible. There's no romance to it." I pushed it away, I did not want his love, I wanted him as a nice big comrade as he had always been.

"It's true, I always thought of you when I was away, and since I have come home I have grown to love you until there is no happiness for me unless you love me too."

"But I don't, I couldn't in that way—why you are just like a brother."

He winced. "For God's sake don't say that when I want you as my wife."

The pain in his face hurt me. "William, dear, I'm terribly sorry but I couldn't marry you, I don't want to marry any one—yet—I want to be free. We are too young to think of marriage, we are only children."

He caught eagerly at my hand. "Well, if you will some day, Betty, I'll be content to wait, as long as I know you will some day."

"I can't promise," I said sadly, "I don't think I could ever love you that way." And returning to the thing which puzzled me, "I don't see how you can possibly

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love me—there's no romance to sweep you off your feet, there's no Life, no——"

How could I explain that thing for which I groped and waited, that something which was hardly tangible and which I could not put into words, but which was fine and splendid and thrilling. I called it "Life" but then I knew so little of Life. But it was an excitement, a possibility, a feeling that anything glorious and wonderful might happen, that the tales of daring, of knightly chivalry might almost come true—that a modern youthful prince would some day appear in a cloud of glory and sweep me away into a wonderful world of romance and emotion which was not everyday life. It was possible that Bertie might turn into this romantic figure, but that it should be William, whom I had always known, was impossible. It was too solid, too much like the dull and placid state in which I saw marriage in Little Torbey.

And so we went home sadly and quietly, agreeing to be friends. On the surface our constant companionship was not changed, but my very efforts to keep our friendship intact made it different from the former easy comradeship.

As luck would have it, Aunt Jane appeared and widened the breach just as his confession was sinking into the background of my thoughts. William was having tea with us one Sunday, for Aunt Mary was always ready to welcome him, and I could read in Aunt Jane's eye what quickly followed after he had

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gone. She looked at me in a calculating kind of way —"Nice boy, that William Hovey."

"Yes," I answered—how unconsciously I could have said it a few weeks before—"he's very nice, I've known him all my life," I added quickly.

"Seems fond of you, too," she went on.

I resented her interference, but gradually I was learning that one could not fly into a rage over everything one resented, and with my slow growing self-control, I said lightly,

"Oh, we both like each other—always been just like brother and sister."

"You might do worse than marry him. He'll have his father's business one day, won't he?"

"I suppose he will—but I don't love him."

"Tut, tut—a girl without means can't always be thinking of love—she——"

"But I have means," I interrupted, "I'm independent." And I walked out of the room.

Oh, my little Mother, how thankful I am that you taught me this blessed doctrine of independence! If I had been dependent on Aunt Jane, even my marriage would have been ordained by her!

At this time only one thing turned my thoughts towards an early marriage—my intense love and devotion for children. Perhaps my early pitying love of animals had been the dawning of this mother-love which was a slowly growing instinct in me. The day after William had told me he loved me, I rode in the train with two lovely little children, and as my

heart went out to them, I thought, "Wouldn't they make up for the ending to romance and adventure which marriage with William would mean?" The entire frankness and absence of consciousness with which I thought about the subject would have told me, if I had known more, how utterly my feelings for him would have made marriage hateful.

Chapter Seven

F my once-adored Nettie, I had seen very little since our play-days. She had gone to a boardingschool just after I had entered the business world, and on her return two years later I occasionally saw her name in the social record of Torbey, which described her as "the beautiful Miss Holmes," and her comingout party as the event of the season. I was thinking of the difference between her life and mine as I walked through the lane one evening on my way back from the office, when my curiosity was awakened by two people coming towards me. The girl was so graceful, and pretty, so daringly dressed for our little town that she would have attracted my attention in any case, but as she looked up at her companion, a man considerably older, there was something in her attitude which set my heart beating. I know I stared as they passed—for a moment her laughing eyes turned to me and in that moment I knew her.

"Nettie," I cried impulsively. "I am glad to see you."

Her look stiffened and she answered slowly, "Hello, Betty, still around this old place?"

"Yes, I'm in business," I answered with less enthusiasm.

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Her pretty brows went upwards—"Yes? Well you must come and see me some time, I'm sorry I can't stay and talk now. Good-bye."

I caught the glimpse of her eyes as they again turned to her companion—how differently they had looked at me. With my cheeks crimson with embarrassment and hurt anger I walked stiffly on. "Go and see her—not I—" and I thought sadly of those old days when we had been such close friends—how changed they were—Kitty hating me, William offering me love instead of the friendship I wanted, John living in some obscure way in Linesmoor, and a hard look on his brother's face whenever he was mentioned.

A few months later there was a grand wedding in the old church of St. Mark's and Nettie was married. None of our old gang was invited to the wedding, but some of that childish feeling of admiration made me hurry through my lunch and creep into an empty pew. When I saw her lovely face through its beautifying veil, I wondered at her self-possession, at her smile, at her evident pleasure in her appearance. Not so had I imagined this eventful happening—where was the look of trembling happiness and mingling fear which I associated with marriage!

For in spite of my four years' office life, I had not changed very much inwardly. Of course in rubbing shoulders in the world of men, a few illusions had been brushed away, but my natural unconsciousness was still so effective a guard that a bludgeon stroke was needed to awaken suspicion and make me see.

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Thus with my Chief. I was proud of serving him, admiring his brains and good-looks, appreciating his kindness to me, and his evident pride in his jolly son, whom his wife had brought into the office two or three times. His extreme courtesy to her did, however, cause me a momentary puzzled wonderment—it was so different from the somewhat easy connubial manners of Little Torbey, rather as if they were strangers. But my curiosity went no further-they were married—the wonderment slid from my mind, till some time later when it was shocked into sudden I was answering the telephone one day, activity. when Hughes, one of the clerks whom I liked least of all, happened to be in the private office. In answer to my "Hello!" a woman's voice replied—the same voice which I had often heard of late and from whom I had taken messages for Mr. Edwards. I had understood that she was a married sister.

"Who was that?" said Hughes when I had finished. I resented his curiosity but after all it did not matter telling him. "It was Mrs. Waters."

A peculiar look came into his eyes—"Too bad ringing up here and letting you take messages."

"Why?" I asked in amazement. "She's Mr. Edwards' sister—isn't she?"

He looked at me for a moment in surprise, then burst out into a horrid laugh. Something in it brought the blood to my cheeks and I turned haughtily away, hating him.

"His sister—well that's a good joke."

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I heard whispers and gigglings in the office, and felt suddenly ashamed and miserable. I looked at Mr. Edwards next day with new eyes, expecting him to be somehow different. But no, he was the same kind "boss," as cheery as ever, just as unself-conscious—how could these things be?

In such ways as this I began to learn that the world was not divided into the good and the bad—that it was all a mixture and that horrid things I saw in the newspapers did happen in my little world. But I kept the knowledge in the outermost part of my brain—and though it dulled the radiance of those romantic dreams and visions which I still cherished, it did not pierce to my inner consciousness.

My ambition to succeed was always awake. For the first year or so all my efforts were spent in getting hold of the work—in learning to become an efficient secretary. Then as the routine gradually became easy, I began to look around me. I had decided that an efficient secretary meant a good deal more than a good typist and shorthand writer, even more than a girl who could write letters without dictation and do the little odd things which save an employer's time,—it meant making his interests a matter of her personal interest, becoming a second pair of eyes and ears, a second memory.

I do not know whether the system of office management in that small concern was better or worse than that then in vogue in other places throughout provincial England. I have called it "system" for

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want of a better title, but that is a misnomer—system was really lacking and compared with the perfection of modern office management and devices, it was a cheerful muddling-through.

Letters were copied by means of wet cloths and a press into a book of thin tissue paper, specially kept for the purpose. Oh, the mess that the continual stream of new office boys made of my nicely-typed letters! John was the only one who gave them careful attention, and alas, he only stayed a short six months. The filing was worse still-all letters which came into the office were put into pigeon-holes, and the old ones just bundled into black tin boxes, with the date of the year written on the lid, and put into a storeroom. Ye gods! What excitement if a letter of two or three years ago had to be found for the Chief—it was like looking for old state papers in the British Museum. Mr. Vincent was the so-called office manager, but he was a lenient, happy-go-lucky little man, and his management consisted in letting people go their own gait so long as things were done somehow. Loose leaf ledgers were unknown and great ponderous books were filled with much writing and at much labour.

I watched and criticised in my own mind, and tried to think of things which might improve the copying and filing. I decided when I made a move, I would try to institute some better method of filing, supposing the new office had as antiquated a one as this.

I was by this time getting thirty-five shillings a week, a very fair salary for a secretary in Linesmoor.

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But I did not see any chance of rising to anything higher in Mr. Edwards' employ and my career was yet to be made. I thought it all carefully out and finally decided that I must go.

It took several weeks before I could summon up my courage for the announcement. Finally I blurted out, "Mr. Edwards, may I speak with you about a personal matter?"

He looked up from his desk, a little surprised. "Go ahead," he said with his nice smile, "what is it?" How I hated my task!

"I feel I must leave your employ."

"Whatever for?"

"Because I have a career to think of—and if I stay on here, I know there is nothing further open to me; I can only be your secretary and I want some position where there is more scope. You know it will be an awful wrench to go, it's not because I don't like being here."

"Are you dissatisfied with the salary?"

"Oh, no, the work I do can never be worth much more than what I am getting now—I want a job where I can take more responsibility, do more work myself."

"I should hate to lose you, but all the same I admire you for wanting to get on. Would it make any difference if I gave you two pounds?"

"Oh, no, no, please don't think I am trying to squeeze a raise, I simply want more scope and opportunity."

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"Have you anything in view?"

"No, only that I want to get to London; that's my goal."

He smiled—"What a lot London is responsible for—the lode-star of every struggling man and woman. Well, I'll see what I can do for you."

A few weeks later he asked me how I would like to go to Bermanton. "Not so much as to London," I answered.

"I have just had a letter from Roberts, you remember he has been to the meetings, and he wants a secretary, to whom he'll pay two pounds for a start. There would be much more scope there, as it is such a huge concern, and it would be experience for you,—also a step in the right direction—towards London," he added smiling.

I remembered Mr. Roberts, a tall, courtly old gentleman, with a very nice smile and a well-bred face. He was the owner of a steel works in Bermanton, one of the wealthiest works in the Midlands. He would be very nice to work for as I knew, having offered to do several letters for him when he had been visiting the North. And, as Mr. Edwards said, it would be a step in the right direction.

"I'll give you a letter to him and you can run down and see him next Tuesday when I am away."

"Thank you very much," I answered gratefully.

On the Tuesday I went down to Bermanton. If I took the new job it would mean leaving home and going into a strange town, but it had a spice of adven-

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manager. I am away a good (charge, and you would be work

I was disappointed, but said r of a number of bells at the side usually big man of heavy build c

"Mr. Wilson, this is Mr. Edv Marchand. She is leaving his recommended her to us very high her to take Miss Stevens' place a

that case she would be working.

I caught a quick look out eyes. The suspicion of a smile t "Very good, Mr. Roberts. will like the work."

As he passed me I noticed that above my own quite respectable h been over six feet tall. When t Mr. Roberts coughed and fidgete "I feel I ought to tell you that

· a flood of tears and refused to s Mr. Wileon frieht--- 1 1

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to leave your employ for the same reason, Mr. Roberts!" My voice was full of confidence and of amused contempt for the late secretary.

Did the Fates hear those lightly spoken words and register them against me as a dare! I wonder!

"Wilson's a splendid man, I trust and admire him with all my heart but I must admit that his manner is a trifle brusque and he also has a temper—quite a temper," he added smiling. "But his men worship him and he is a good friend to them. I am talking to you in this unusual way because I feel a sense of responsibility in bringing you to a strange town and I should not like you to come without knowing that there may be a few difficulties."

"I like difficulties," I answered cheerfully. My fighting blood was up now, nothing would have kept me away.

When I had secured my new job and all arrangements were made, I told William that I was leaving Torbey. "It will be better—it will make a clean break," I said quietly.

"But, Betty, I can come and see you; you don't expect me to give up seeing you altogether?"

"I would like to see you—I shall be lonely at Bermanton, but I don't want to be selfish, it will be better for you to forget me."

"I won't. Do you mean you won't marry me—ever?"

"I can't, William, I know I shall never change."

He burst out incoherently, "You don't know! You're cruel, you're so horribly cold and determined, you might wait——" and in his anger and disappointment he looked so young and boyish that my heart was touched by an almost motherly feeling of pity. Heavens, how awfully young he seemed. "You'll thank me some day, William—good-bye."

From Aunt Jane's point of view, I might just as well have decided to go on a voyage of exploration to the Arctic regions—the one would not have been more crazy than the other. "Here you have a comfortable home with Mary and Agnes, you admit you are getting on very nicely in your work and yet you suddenly throw up a definite post and go careering to Bermanton—to live in a boarding house without any control—why—why?"

I smiled at the thought of gentle Aunt Mary being considered as a controlling power—then I tried to answer Aunt Jane's amazement—"It isn't just craziness, I want to make a career for myself—I'm about at the sticking point where I am, and though London would have pleased me better, I won't neglect this opportunity for it may lead there—at any rate it will be experience."

"I trust it won't be experience that you will be better without!" said Aunt Jane with her nose in the air and the words and expression were so stagey that I had much ado to keep from laughing outright. Poor Aunt Jane, I would always be a thorn in her side.

Margaret's remark was characteristic of her-

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"How can you go into a strange place, where you won't know any one, and leave a safe comfy job here! I should be frightened to death!" She had nothing of the pioneer spirit—sometimes I envied her.

I wrote to Bertie Wilfred, telling him of my new move and he answered that in a few months longer he hoped to be at the end of his grind and then perhaps he would have time to see old friends—would I let him have my address in Bermanton? He had kept his promise about working hard and I had not seen him for eighteen months—now the thought that he still wanted to see me when he was through brought nearer that dim future—did it seem more attractive? At any rate there was no one else who seemed so like that unknown one.

Soon all arrangements had been made. Aunt Mary and her sister returned to the little cottage they owned and which they had let when they joined Mother—in the windows of the old house floated the dismal signal, "To let."

Perhaps the most regret I felt was in leaving Mr. Edwards. There were tears in my eyes as I bade him good-bye; the conflicting feeling of admiration and the reverse which had followed the discovery of "Mrs. Waters" was buried in a sincere gratitude for his kindness to me. How happy I had been for these four years! And now the future stretched before me again almost as unknown as it had been on my seventeenth birthday—such was my thought as I set out for my new job.

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BOOK THREE: WOMANHOOD



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BOOK THREE: WOMANHOOD

Chapter One

BERMANTON was a stolid manufacturing town in the Midlands. I did not know a soul in it and when I got out of the train, I felt rather small and lonely. The boarding house I had chosen from an advertisement smelt of cooking and as it was as near as possible to the new works, its position was not altogether desirable. But I tried to offset my longing for the fields and lanes of Little Torbey by the fact that being able to walk to my job saved fares and gave me the exercise I needed. For after the early years of activity and freedom, when limbs and lungs were used to their fullest extent, the change to a sedentary life in a badly lit and stuffy office had been very trying. It spoke well for my health that my colour had not faded nor my spirits become dulled.

The Wroten Steel Works, of which Mr. Wilson was manager, seemed enormous when compared with Mr. Edwards' small shop, and the first few weeks there were miserable indeed. The contrast between the friendship surrounding me in my work at Linesmoor, and the apparent indifference of a great busi-

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ness organisation to an unimportant cipher like me was depressing.

And though I had set out with a determination not to take any notice of Mr. Wilson's manner, and to treat him with quiet dignity whether he were angry or pleased, his taciturn habits and brusque way of speaking made me long for Mr. Edwards' jolly manner and friendly voice.

I admitted to myself that I had been an idiot for leaving, and if it had not been for the fact that I would not be beaten, I believe I should have asked him to take me back.

There was only one thing to take my mind away from these things and that was work—and I threw myself into the new job with all my energy and interest.

I could see that Mr. Wilson had an immense influence with his men. When the various foremen came to his office, he treated them with an easy good-fellowship, entirely lacking in his intercourse with the clerks or with me—but he was always the master, and I believe there was no one under that roof who did not stand in awe of him. Indeed I had this same feeling myself, and it amused me for it was the first time I had felt it for any one since that almost forgotten Father. I suppose it was that vague thing we call personality which had the quality of urging all who came under his direction to put their hearts into their work and do the best they could. It was an

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enormous asset in managing a rough set of men like those in the Wroten Steel Works.

I had a little office of my own, leading out of the Chief's room—it was my first private sanctum and it made me feel very important. The first day I was there I heard a scurry of quick feet, and round my door came a vivid red head and a voice like quick-firing guns—"Where is Mr. Wilson?"

I felt sure that he had come to have a look at the new secretary, and the tone annoying me, I replied very casually, "I don't know."

Then the head was followed by a little body, not more than five feet high, and the strangest looking man I have ever seen stood before me. Two watery blue eyes peered out of a mass of red,—red hair, red eyebrows, red beard, red cheeks. The effect was bewildering. He pulled his beard with a quick nervous hand, his manner was truculent and bullying, and I disliked him instantly and entirely. I went on typing without appearing to realise that he was there.

He stood for a moment, watching me. Then in a slightly more pleasing tone, "So you don't know when Mr. Wilson will be back?"

"I didn't say that, I said I didn't know where he was."

His face reflected astonishment. "When will he be back?"

"At three o'clock, so he said."

"Hum!" he muttered and walked out.

I heard his strident voice in the general office, and

scattering clerks suggested that he was indulging in a fit of bullying. I found it was a frequent occurrence with Mr. Matthews, as he was called. He was manager in the office, under Mr. Wilson, and hated by every one.

At three o'clock the Chief came back, and in bolted "Mr. Red-Head." I was amazed at the change in his manner. Under Mr. Wilson's keen eyes, he coughed and fidgeted, his bounce gradually deserting him.

The boss was apparently annoyed. I heard his angry voice, and a fist descending on the desk, and through the door I saw the little man jump. "It's no good, Pearson," he was saying, "you're a pack of ——fools!" I coloured at the decidedly unsavoury adjective. Presently he came to the communicating door, and with a glint of grim humour, said,

"I think you had better shut this door when I am interviewing!"

I realised very quickly that Mr. Matthews thought he could bully me as he did his clerks—"the idea of being afraid of that little five feet of humanity, but then I suppose he has the power of sacking the poor things, and that makes a difference!" I disliked him so much that I was just waiting for an opportunity of defying his so-called power and when one day he came to me with his usual bounce and in a quick tone said,

"Please type that at once, I'm waiting for it," I went on typing. There were other typists for the [130]

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office, I was not supposed to do his work, and his tone was irritating.

His voice rose. "Did you hear me, I want that typing at once."

"I certainly heard you, you spoke quite loudly enough for the whole office to hear."

He fumed and spluttered—"Well, I want that typing at once."

I looked up at him. "Mr. Matthews, I am busy with Mr. Wilson's work—there's a letter here which has to be ready for his return, but if I have time later, I'll do that piece of work for you."

He was jumping with rage. "I'll report you—then you'll see."

"Please do so—settle the matter with Mr. Wilson. I am his secretary, there are other typists for the office work. Though, of course, I'll be glad to help you when I'm not busy."

He bounced out. Although outwardly calm, I was very angry with the horrid little man and my cheeks were burning. I took the letter into the Chief's room, and there standing up at the far end against the fire-place was Mr. Wilson. He was laughing heartily. I was amazed at the difference it made in him. He looked jolly, and much younger, with a devil-may-care humour in his eyes.

The colour spread still further over my face, for he must have heard every word.

"That's right," he chuckled, "don't you let him bully you," and I smiled in my relief. It was the first touch

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of human feeling he had shown to me. Later I judged that he himself did not like Matthews, nor trust him implicitly, but I suppose he found him a good boss for the clerks—at least he knew how to get the greatest amount of work out of them. I do not know whether Matthews ever did report me, but I never heard of the matter again.

Gradually I became used to Mr. Wilson's almost forbidding manner and as I saw the real good nature and absolute justice with which he treated his men, my first feelings began to soften. His unusual ability also appealed to my admiration, and the fact that gossip in the office said that his married life was not happy threw a veil of romance around him. He treated me with a cool impersonal regard as if I were part of my machine.

The filing in this office was a little better than at Mr. Edwards', but it was still rather primitive, and occasionally there were terrible bursts of anger when important letters could not be found. Finally one day I made a decision. "Mr. Wilson, can I look after the filing of your letters?"

"I wish you would and keep things straight. It's no use leaving anything to those stupid boys."

Thereafter I made many innovations, but I kept them to the private office, for I did not want a continual fight with Matthews, and I knew he would be jealous of my suggestions. I took charge of the filing and of important letters I made a carbon copy so that if the one in the copy-book were smudged almost be-

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yond recognition—as it often was by careless boys—here was a fair one easy to read. I did suggest that this system might altogether take the place of the copying press, but there was a feeling that loose copies would not hold in a court of law, and so the old system went on. Gradually I took up a lot of the detail work, kept records, made notes, and tried to become a second memory for my hard-worked Chief. I think that previously he had never had any one who was interested in the work, and that they had only just typed his letters.

I had been there just over six months when I had a summons to Mr. Roberts' office. Fearful and wondering I responded—could it be that Mr. Wilson was not satisfied? He had not said he was, but neither had he made any complaint, and I knew that I was working well.

Mr. Roberts' smiling face reassured me. "I want to tell you that Mr. Wilson has recommended that you have a rise in salary," he said in his stately formal voice; "he tells me that he is extremely pleased with your work, so henceforth your envelope will be a little heavier."

"Thank you very much." As I went out I thrilled at the unexpected and indirect praise—"funny man" I thought, "why couldn't he have told me himself!" And I found that I was smiling gently at the surmise that perhaps he was shy.

A few months later as he came into the office, greet-[133]

ing me with his gruff "Good morning," he stopped at my door and said abruptly,

"Ever been in charge?"

As I uttered a surprised "No!" a smile touched his lips.

"I mean of other girls. It's this way—Matthews can manage his clerks all right, but that roomful of typists is beyond him. I was thinking of having a head who would be responsible for them, who would engage them, or sack 'em, to whom all complaints would be made, so that I would know whom to blame"—his eyes twinkled with that sudden school-boy humour—"I'm tired of having Matthews say it was Miss So-and-so who spoiled this, that and the other. Want to try the job?"

My heart jumped in gratified surprise. Then all my zeal had not been in vain, though I had thought that he had not noticed my interest and ambition.

"Yes," I answered eagerly, "I've never been in charge of any girls before, but I'd like to try."

"You'll have a job on," and I smiled back at the amused glint in his eyes, "but we'll try it." He strode to his desk, touched a bell and his face bore its usual stern glumness as Matthews came in.

"I'm going to put Miss Marchand in charge of the typists. Henceforth she will be responsible for all their work—all complaints must be made through her, she's to sack them and engage them. I'm tired of your troubles with them. Understand?"

Matthews' face fell and he began one of his splut-[134]

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tering excuses, but an abrupt, "That's all—we'll try it," cut him short.

"Thank you," I said after the little man had gone out, and then as the thought came that if I were to do the job well, I ought to be in the typists' room, which would mean relinquishing my private office, my delight fell. "Shall I transfer to their room?"

"No, you wouldn't be so much use to me so far away. You'll have to try and control them as you are. If you can't manage it, I'll hire a new girl and put her in there. I'll be away for a week, and that will give you a start."

For the first time I was thankful for my size. It probably added three or four years to my age, and gave me some sense of command over girls, the tallest of whom was a head shorter than I. But I had no delusions about the task before me; it would be a steady, silent battle. There were five in the typists' room, all very slightly known to me, as my work had not taken me among them. I knew Matthews would not help matters; only one fact would help me, that they probably disliked him.

Next morning I had my typewriter carried into their room. Five pairs of eyes looked at me, curiosity their chief motive, an underlying resentment not far behind.

"I want to learn something of your work," I said cheerfully to the girl next to whom I sat, and knowing Matthews would have prepared them for the fray, "Won't you show me what you do?"

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"It's accounts," she answered somewhat sullenly. By her side was a clipped batch of papers, with endless items and figures—details of repair work and material which had been put into a certain job.

"If you'll give me a sheet, I'll help you."

I thanked my stars that I had become a rapid and accurate typist, for the thing taxed all my powers. And I had to keep my ears open to what the others were doing, for my first task was to learn something of their personalities. I soon found that she of the accounts, Miss Wren, was quiet, subdued, weary-she seemed to be the scape-goat of the crowd. No wonder she looked weary after those endless rows of monotonous figures. To another of them, a pert, pretty girl with red hair. named Nellie Smith, fell all the plums-she took occasional letters from several of the clerks, but chiefly from Mr. Matthews, and her day was enlivened with bits of gossip and scraps of flirtation, besides which she had a wonderful knack of working as little as possible, for with a lift of her pretty brows she would say to another applicant for letters,

"I'm sorry, I'm full up just now with Mr. Matthews' work," knowing full well that no complaint would be made to him because of his known interest in her.

For part of a day I worked with each in turn, trying to make friends, eliminating any suggestion of superiority or "bossiness."

At the end of the week I had found out just how [136]

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much work each one did and that it was badly distributed, the load falling on those who were most willing. With an inward tremor I broke the ice,—"I want to make a suggestion, I'm sure you'll see that it is not fair to let one or two go on doing those accounts, day after day, without a break, while the others have more interesting work. The advantage which might come from increased speed due to doing exactly the same thing is lost in the dulness of monotony. Besides Miss Wren is forgetting all her shorthand. Each week I suggest that two of you take a turn at the accounts, leaving the other three available for letters and other typing. And I'll ask the men to divide their work as evenly as possible, so that every one has about the same amount. I want to help all of you to be as happy as possible," I added earnestly.

"What about Mr. Matthews' letters?" asked Miss Smith pertly.

"You go on taking them till it is time for your turn at the accounts," I answered smiling, "and then we'll see." I foresaw a difficulty due to her influence over him.

I had made friends with most of the boys in the office, and they were willing to help me, but from Mr. Matthews complaints came with the regularity of clockwork, till I was almost in despair. But I persevered in straightening them out, pointing out errors without bluster, trying to mete out absolute justice to every girl, without favouritism—that was the thing which had previously ruined the morale of the room,

as each one tried to outdo the rest in Matthews' eyes. When one of the girls, with rather more education than the others and whom I liked, grumbled ruefully to me that she loathed her week of the accounts, I answered frankly,

"Now you can imagine how Miss Wren felt—look how much brighter she is!"

I fear this statement had in it more of hope than of reality—by no stretch of imagination could one think of her as looking bright. Still I went on hoping.

When it came to Miss Smith's turn for the dreaded week's grind, I asked Mr. Matthews if he would transfer his letters for one week to Miss Perkins—she too was smart and not bad-looking. He grumbled but consented and I felt a glimpse of triumph—when Mr. Wilson asked me how I was getting on, I said that I thought I could manage.

Alas and alas! On the Monday I was too busy to go into their room, but the day following when I visited them in the middle of the morning, I found Miss Wren typing accounts and looking more dejected than ever, and Miss Smith laughing with one of the clerks who quickly resumed dictation as I entered. I waited till he had gone.

"Miss Smith, I thought it was your week for accounts?" I said quietly.

"It was, Miss Marchand, but I can't do the old things, I really can't do them."

"Then you must go." I did not raise my voice, but in it was the first sign of the iron glove which I knew [138]

Womanhood

would have to be shown sooner or later. She looked at me, taking my measure. "Do you want to try again, or shall I find some one to take your place?"

Her pretty face clouded sullenly. "Oh, I'll try." "Good, then that's settled."

And for a time peace reigned in the camp and in lieu of the ambition to succeed which was apparently entirely lacking in my five, I tried to encourage a spirit of friendly competition in the amount of work which each could do. As the girls began to know me better, as they realised that I was not unduly elevated by my new position, but was in keen sympathy with their efforts to earn a living and desirous of having them happy, they began to work with me; from the old reign of back-biting and favouritism, they began to know that if they worked well, they were safe; that if there was an injustice, it would be remedied. And Mr. Wilson listened patiently to suggestions for their comfort—a small storeroom was cleared out and fitted as a lunchroom, and better heating and lighting arrangements were made in their office.

Chapter Two

THE people who lived in my boarding house were for the most part staid and elderly, and of the twenty or more clerks in the office, there were only two whom I liked. I occasionally went to the theatre with one or the other, but after the home-life of Little Torbey, with all its friendly relations, I was rather lonely out of the works and spent more and more of my time and interest there. If this had not been so, I doubt whether I should have managed to keep an eye on "my girls" as I called them and get through the large amount of work for Mr. Wilson.

We were specially busy and I knew that the Chief was often working on Sundays. I was shy about offering my help, but one Saturday in April when there had been an unusual rush and Mr. Wilson had to go for an appointment, he said, rustling up the unanswered letters on his desk, "Well, I suppose these will have to stay; I'll come down to-morrow and get them all prepared for you on Monday—I want data for those letters to Harkers and Withington."

"I'll come and work to-morrow," I said shyly, "if it will help you."

His face lit up. "Will you really? Well that is nice of you and then we can get all cleared up and start [140]

afresh on Monday—sure you haven't any appointments?"

"Sure!"

"All right, come as early as you like to-morrow."

The relief in his face and his evident pleasure at my offer delighted me—how I had misjudged his manner at first—underneath its outer sternness, it was delightful.

Then as luck would have it, Bertie Wilfred chose that very Sunday for a suggested trip to Bermanton—there was a wire from him at the boarding house, asking whether I would be free, and saying how badly he needed this day's respite before taking his examinations—would I wire back at once, so that he could start that afternoon in his machine.

I smiled at his usual lordly disregard of cost, but as I was sending a brief reply that I would be working all day Sunday, I felt a momentary surprise that I was not so keenly disappointed at missing his visit as I might have expected—and thought, laughing at myself, "Well since you have to earn your living, it is indeed fortunate that you are beginning to love your work so well, and to like your Chief so much!"

For though I had not lost my awe of him, it had softened into a pleasant feeling of admiration and respect, instilling into me the keen desire to help him all I could, and to win his acknowledgment that I was useful.

From the first he dominated me with the force of that personality which had the same effect on his men.

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I had seen this effect in a moment of danger, and it had thrilled me to think how strong he was. There had been dissatisfaction at the works, fomented by paid agitators, and not marking the real feelings of the men. They were well-paid, well-treated, and devoted to Mr. Wilson. Ugly feelings, however, began to gain force—there were rumours of a strike, of demanding "a share in all the money that's going into old man Roberts' pockets"—the usual "arguments" of a mass of men led by clever and unscrupulous speakers.

Mr. Roberts came up to the office one day in a state of agitation,—"Wilson, there's going to be trouble—what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't think there will be any trouble," Mr. Wilson answered in his calm, assured voice. "I have my eye on the ringleaders, I am just waiting for a move on their part, and then I'm going to act." The word came out like a pistol shot. Just then an old foreman came hastily into the office. "The men mean trouble, sir, I don't like the looks of things." Dimly from the works came the sound of a loud, strident voice, and angry cries in response.

Another man came running into the office. "They are coming in, sir, they are coming through, they say, to talk to Mr. Roberts."

The latter grew very white and sat down heavily on a chair. I looked at my Chief. His face was grim and into his eyes crept the light of battle. "Oh, are they!" he said, walking out of the office.

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At the end of a long, wide corridor, leading into the Works, I saw a crowd of pushing, shouting men, their gleaming eyes looking fierce and savage in the midst of dirt and unshaven faces. And before this wild mob, one man appeared, standing with his hands in his pockets, looking almost nonchalant.

"What's the matter, boys?" he asked.

"We're coming through to talk to the old man," said a leader, amid cries of encouragement and hoots of "Who's Roberts?"

Mr. Wilson's voice grew grimmer. "You can't come through here. If you want to talk to Mr. Roberts, you must appoint a proper committee of a few of the men, and discuss matters with us quietly and orderly."

"No, we're coming in now. Who's to stop us?" "I am."

Further hoots and groans went up, and a burly man with an evil countenance stepped forward and with an ugly laugh, "Oh, you'll stop us, will you? Like to see you. Eh, boys, see the torf what's going to stop us!" he leered.

There was a hush. The man fell like a log driven backwards with a blow of the Chief's powerful arm.

It was a daring thing to do in that crowd of roused and angry men—it might have been the signal for an outburst, if it had not been backed up by that strange magnetic power which can subdue without knowing why Then, too, personal courage and provess ap-

pealed to that sporting instinct hidden deep in the cramped hearts of these hard-worked men.

"Now, boys," the steady voice went on, "I don't want to quarrel with you, it's the outsiders I have the quarrel with—if you'll go back quietly to your work, and select a committee, I'll see that you get the right thing done, if you have any real grievances. Have you ever known me go back on my word?"

"No, no!" and "he's all right!" came from a few voices. Their passions were already beginning to cool, already they were beginning to wonder just why they had been so furious. In a few minutes, they shuffled out of the same door, with Mr. Wilson on their heels.

I was trembling and yet intensely thrilled. Courage and prowess appealed to me, too. It was fine to work for such a man, a man with such power and strength and daring.

And his action gave me an impetus towards the thing I had been dreading and which I had yet known for weeks had to be done—the sacking of the redhaired Nellie. For though she had made a show of obeying, secretly she had been a rebel, and I knew how much better the rest would be without her influence. But it was my first "execution" and the thought of deliberately taking away a girl's position made me sick, though indeed it was more than likely that she would quickly get another.

I made up my mind I would give her notice at the end of the week and then tried to forget it, but [144]

apparently I was not successful, for, on the day before the deed had to be done, Mr. Wilson silently handed me a set of records I had just given to him. I blushed in confusion as I saw that I had made two stupid mistakes.

"What's the matter with you? You've not been paying your usual attention to details the last day or two."

After a momentary surprise that he had noticed so much more than I imagined, I said frankly, "I'm sorry, I have been worried, for I have to give Miss Smith the sack."

"Isn't she any good?" he asked gruffly.

"Yes, as a typist—but—" I had an instant's fear that he would think I was shirking a difficulty by getting rid of her— "but she undermines my authority. I have given her several chances—now she'll have to go."

"All right—get the job over—and come back to earth!" Over his stern face flashed that sudden humorous boyish smile—there was something in it which always made my heart leap in quick response; it was so unexpected, so full of mischief that it broke up my usual business-like attitude, sending the smiles dancing over my own face and meeting the youth in me.

And after all I need not have had any qualms, for Miss Smith came to me next morning and with a pretty smile said, "I'm sorry, but I'll have to leave you next week, for I have another and a better job."

I managed to say, "All right, I hope you'll like it," with a straight face; then as she left me, I burst out laughing.

"What's the joke?" said my Chief's voice.

"Miss Smith has given me notice—I'm thinking of all my unnecessary worry over my first execution."

"Teach you a lesson at hardness of heart, won't it?" and he laughed with me.

Time slipped by so quickly that it was with something of a shock that a letter from Margaret made me realise that I had been with Mr. Wilson just a year-"You'll be having two weeks' vacation soon, won't you?" she wrote. "I have a most exciting plan-what do you say to a motor tour through Belgium—the Wilfreds, two college boys and you and I-wouldn't it be thrilling! I had a letter from Lady Wilfred saying she hoped that you would come too-isn't it nice of her?" I smiled at the influence which had been at work with this lady whom I had never met-for by the same mail came a hurried note from Bertie saving that by August, the time planned, he would be free with honours, or not-but in any case, he hoped I'd agree to the plan. And Lady Wilfred sent her official invitation.

"It certainly would be thrilling!" I thought—then blankly—"Why then am I not thrilled?" It was the sort of thing that should have sent me wild with delight—"of course, I am delighted, but being away from the office for a whole fort ight, things will get into such a muddle, and now I am so important I have

to think of these things"—so I smilingly answered my own wonder.

And next day I arranged the holiday with Mr. Wilson, told Margaret how delighted I would be to join them, wished Bertie good luck, thanked Lady Wilfred, and waited for the Saturday on which we were to start—the first in August.

When the Friday evening came and I said good-bye to Mr. Wilson and the office, I was surprised again that I was not more exhilarated by the prospect of a release from work for a whole two weeks-I contrasted my delight and relief in that first week's vacation. Was it that work was making me older and more serious, or was it that it was beginning to occupy such an important part in my life that I could not get away from its domination? I laughed at the idea of my becoming so fond of work, but nevertheless admitted that the last six months had been the happiest in my business life, for I seemed to have found my niche. I got on well with my girls, and was genuinely fond of Miss Cummins, the one who had taken Nellie Smith's place—a youngster of seventeen who was as sharp as a needle, and whose ambition I encouraged.

Those vague dreams of romance and of the unknown one who would carry me into their midst had faded into a still more dim and distant future. That tightly-folded inner self which I was dimly conscious held a mass of feeling contradicting my passing wonder as to whether I was cold and heartless, was still

waiting for the touch of the one who would awaken it. Sometimes I feared that there might never be such a one—that I might pass my days in this happy content, finally slipping into that staid state of marriage without any intervening glory of romance and adventure. And this prospect frightened me-I was still eager to taste Life to the uttermost, to miss nothing of its excitement and possibility. Was it that I liked all my cavaliers too well? There was Tom Richey, for instance, an under manager in the Works who took me to several dances. I liked to waltz with him, and in the midst of the music, with the lights and the swaying crowds, sometimes his handsome face would seem to alter till I wondered dimly whether he might not be the one. Then after some weeks of a mild flirtation, he had kissed me-and in his eyes was something at which that inner, unconsenting self revolted, unconsciously, instinctively, scarcely knowing why, and yet making it impossible that I should ever like him so much again.

So I still waited—waited for that big and wonderful romance which should change my world.

Chapter Three

JOINED Lady Wilfred's party in London, their great touring car taking us to Dover in supreme comfort. She and her husband were very kind to me—even Bessie gave me a nice smile. Margaret greeted me with her usual quiet affection and then I turned to Bertie Wilfred; we shook hands almost in silence. He looked tired, and I had a momentary remorse that I had sent him into the grind. It had made him older, more serious. I waited eagerly till I could ask him whether he knew the result of his examination.

We crossed to Ostend, and there began a wonderful trip through the gentle countryside of little Belgium. I enjoyed it very much, but yet was conscious of a vague unrest, a feeling that something was lacking, which I could not define. In Bertie, too, I sensed a tensity, a restlessness which I put down to anxiety, for he was still awaiting a wire from London as to whether he was through or not. The rest of the party were frankly happy—Bessie and Margaret enjoying themselves to the uttermost with the two boys.

And then at Bruges came the news—Bertie had passed with honours. Somehow the excitement with which the six young people of the party received the

news seemed out of place in beautiful, peaceful Bruges, with its century-before-last appearance and its almost heavenly peace and quiet—it should be the home of age and slumbering content. It was the last day of my holiday; in the morning I should have to catch the boat at Ostend, while the rest of the party went on through France. Yet the prospect of work did not bring me any dismay.

After dinner which magnificently celebrated, the success, we strolled out from the quaint little hotel, with its flagged centre court, into the narrow cobbly streets. Somehow Bertie and I drifted away from the others, and there by the side of one of those ageless silent canals, Bertie Wilfred asked me to marry him.

What had happened to those vague dreams, when the possibility of his laying honours and wealth at my feet had been so welcome? I looked at him now without emotion. I was almost frightened at myself—couldn't I feel, was I to go through Life in this twilight state of contentment?

"All through the grind, Betty, I've worked with the thought of you in my mind. You know it was hard to buckle to and really do some work after two or three years' loafing—but the thought of you kept me at it. I knew you would never love a slacker. And now, Betty, even if I had no money from the Governor, I could earn a living—for my wife," he added softly.

"Bertie," I said desperately, breathlessly, "I can't, I don't love you!"

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"Don't say that"—his look was pained, a little puzzled. "I thought you were beginning to care a little before I began to work—have I been just a blind fool all this time?"

"No, I did like you," I answered eagerly, "I thought I loved you. I don't know what's the matter with me now. But I don't love you now."

His voice was fierce and strained—"Then there is some one else?"

"Oh, no, no," I said quickly, passionately, "there isn't any one."

Turning suddenly he caught me in his arms, looking into my eyes, his face solemn, questioning, as if he would look down into my soul. The blood flooded into my face, bathing me in a hot fire, till I felt burning all over. I was furious with myself,—why had I blushed like that, it would look as though there was some one else, and of course there wasn't—who could there be?

"Then if there is no one else, I'll wait—in——"

"I do like you awfully, but I don't love you now. But don't give up being my friend, let's just go on as we used to, for a time."

"Yes, we'll go on as we used to, for a time—then, Betty, perhaps?"

Deep in my heart I felt sure that I should never love him, but some instinct made me welcome the possibility—of course I *might* grow to love him, I thought eagerly, there was no reason why I should not, was there? And so I was silent.

Taking comfort from my silence, he bent his head to kiss me, his haughty face strangely altered.

Unconsciously my hands went up to shield my lips, and with another burning blush I shrank back—back against that old stone wall which must have seen so many lovers' meetings.

"Don't, don't," I said in a fierce whisper, "Don't kiss me now." I shook myself free.

"How different you are, Betty, you did not mind my kissing you when I said good-bye, did you?"

"No," I answered hastily, seeking excuses, "but, I—I—it would seem like binding me, and I don't want to promise. Let us go back to the others now," I added eagerly.

I hated the sadness in his face which I had caused. "Why couldn't I love him—I liked him immensely," I thought, and in the distance came the vista of wealth and happiness, an easy life, no more struggles for a career, no more rebuffs—if I were his wife. But that inner depth within me recoiled from the idea—no never, I couldn't be his wife, I didn't love him.

I shivered. "Some one walked over my grave, Bertie," I tried to say lightly, and in the revulsion from my sad thoughts, I went so much to the other extreme that Lady Wilfred, looking at me for a moment with her quiet deep-seeing eyes, said "Why, Betty is happy to-night."

Again that shivering sense of fear, or sorrow passed over me—"People keep walking over my grave," I said again.

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Next day, as Bertie saw me off at Ostend, he said seriously, "I'm coming to see you at Bermanton, you know."

"Of course," I answered gaily—it was amazing how gay I felt. Then with sudden realisation of how incongruous gaiety would seem to him, I tried to look more serious. Apparently, however, my attempt was useless, for he said half sadly,

"You look quite happy."

"It must be the thought of work," I answered banteringly, to avoid the search for a reason to my happiness, which seemed so unnatural.

He pulled a face—"What bad judgment. Good-bye for a time, little Betty."

"Good-bye!" Then the steamer was off and soon I could see him no longer.

But I was happy—that much was certain, and when Monday came and I set out for the office, I felt as though I had reached my home. The great works seemed to welcome me. With a smiling face I roamed about my office, looking indulgently on the confusion of papers and dust.

I started at the sound of a firm footstep—yes, it was my Chief.

"Hello!" he said, putting his head in my room, "I'm glad you are back—couldn't get any work done somehow. I haven't let any one touch the records, they'd only muddle them—so you'd better start in and get straight." There was a smile in his blue eyes.

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"All right," I said happily, smiling too, "I'll soon get things straightened out."

It was fine to be back—to be a cog in the machine once more. Idling and vacations were all right but they did not bring this satisfaction—my work had been missed!

Chapter Four

WAS eating a late meal after an unusually hard day's work, about two months later, when suddenly into my tired mind flashed the thought—"I've forgotten that telegram to Harkers. What an awful thing to do!" I had had to fill in some data, and so had left it till I had finished the letters—then a rush came and I had absolutely forgotten all about it. I knew how important it was and I thought that there was only one thing to do—to return to the works and send it off—then they would get it first thing in the morning and could wire back immediately.

The works looked very different by night—only an occasional footstep disturbed the silence, while by day a continual stream of traffic rumbled and roared in the busy thoroughfare. I rang the bell and presently the wrinkled face of Watson, the old night watchman, peered through an inch of open door.

"What do you want?" he asked gruffly.

"Oh, Watson, I've forgotten something, so I had to come back."

"Why, it's Miss Marchand"—he looked relieved; "all right, come in."

I stepped through the narrow postern gate into the huge silent building. Our footsteps echoed, we seemed

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to be in another world. By day a hive of busy workmen, the epitome of commerce, of practical skill and money-making—by night a place of ghosts, full of glamour and romance, a little aweing by reason of the mighty spaces. High in the blackness I knew were the great spans of the roofs, but I seemed to be shut in by an impenetrable wall of darkness, made darker by the swinging light of his lantern. He guided my feet to the door leading into the offices.

"Now I know my way, thank you, Watson."

"You'll be all right, then?"

"Oh, yes, thanks," I called cheerfully, thanking heaven that I had remembered in time. With a sigh of relief, I found the figures, took the cover off the machine and began to type the message.

A firm tread echoed along the pavement outside it stopped, and the bell of the works rang. "Some one else forgotten something!" I chuckled.

I had only lit the one light over my desk and it intensified the darkness around me. The footsteps were coming through the outer office—my heart beat a little faster, surely they were familiar!

I looked up and in the shadow of the doorway stood Mr. Wilson.

"What in the name of goodness are you doing here at this time of night?"

"I forgot that telegram to Harkers, and so I came back to send it."

"That was decent of you." He paused, then, "Aren't you frightened?"

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"Of what?" I looked surprised.

"Of ghosts and things," he answered smiling.

"Oh, no, I didn't think about it, although it does seem strange at night." Unconsciously we spoke in low voices, responding to the spell of the unusual silence. "I have finished now—can I do anything for you?"

"No-no, you better go."

I was hurt at the sudden abrupt tone—"Very well," I answered coldly, and collecting the telegram and copies, stood up.

But he was still standing in the doorway, his eyes fixed upon me in a strange fierce stare. They dominated me, held me so that I could not turn away. The papers fluttered out of my hands—my body seemed as if it were slowly floating away into unconsciousness.

So for a moment's time we stood immovable. Then with abrupt force his arms were round me, crushing my body, filling me with an amazing happiness which throbbed to my brain in waves of emotion, leaving no power for thought. With his mouth against mine I was only conscious of the glad surrender of that cold, unconsenting inner self to a rapture which filled my whole being. Dimly I heard his low whisper, "Dearest, how I love you!"

Emotion surged over me—swelled—broke on a thought which groped its way slowly out of oblivion, expanding in my brain till it seemed as though it

would burst, and tumbling from my lips in a frightened whisper,

"But you are married!"

The ardent look faded from his eyes, and turning away he flung himself into a chair, "Oh, dearest, forgive me, you would if you knew how I loved you!"

He loved me. And suddenly understanding illuminated the past months, gave meaning to my happiness in my work, to my lack of response to Bertie's love, to my restlessness while I was away. Blind fool that I was—always blind till a thing was hammered into my consciousness.

I loved him. And he was married.

He who had swept me away from contentment, from friendship, from admiration to this new emotion, which terrified and yet brought immeasurable happiness, belonged to another woman. Was it to this that all my hopes and struggles had been tending, was this the something big, the fine glowing romance, for which I had waited? For a moment I looked at the hunched-up figure angrily—why had he told me, why had he awakened me, made me realise my womanhood, stripped away the aloofness of that inner self which had hitherto stood a sentinel against careless impulse, pleasure, admiration, to a pulsing vitality which even now thrilled at the thought of his kiss.

To what a sordid end my bright and radiant dreams had come! Then a quick compassion at the thought that he too was suffering forced the tears to my eyes,

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and involuntarily I went to him and put my hand upon his shoulder. He held it against his face as he said in a low voice,

"You will forgive me—I love you so! I thought it was only admiration, but when you were away, I missed you so much, I was restless and miserable—then you came back, and I was happy again. And I began to realise, but I fought against my feelings, I did not want to hurt your bright, fearless spirit. When I saw you standing there, I forgot everything." His voice was so low that I could hardly hear it—"I'm not quite so base as you think, I have no real wife, she's been nothing to me for years, but I won't kiss you again."

"Again,—again is too late." The flimsy barrier of admiration and hero-worship was down too effectually ever to be raised.

"Oh, don't look so sad—you make me hate myself. If you knew how I have watched your dear face —it was so deliciously serious and businesslike, and I found myself thinking of things which would send the smiles rippling over it, bringing that young sunny look to your eyes. Now I have spoiled everything you hate me!"

That he should think that hurt me intolerably. Without the consciousness of will I found myself bending towards him, ready to lay my face against his hair, to smooth away his sorrow with the assurance of my love—then the thought again awoke in my brain—he is married. I jerked upright, suffering that

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I could not comfort him, standing silent and miserable.

Abruptly he stood up—"I can't bear not knowing—do you hate me?"

With his hands on my cheeks he raised my head till he was looking deep into my eyes. Dominating me, he forced the truth from me. "No," I whispered.

'Standing rigid, I devoted all my will to fighting the impulse which was swaying me towards him. "You love me!" he said triumphantly; then as he heard my urgent "Now please let me go," his hands dropped—

"What can we do?" he asked miserably.

"Nothing, we must forget it. We must go on as before."

"It will be hard."

"It must be done—you will help me, won't you?" "I will," he answered solemnly.

So I went home to face this strange new world and my dimmed future. Happiness and sorrow alternated—when it seemed as though I could not bear the knowledge that my bright dreams had come to an end which was shameful and sordid, the exaltation of this love would suddenly triumph, absorbing much of the sorrow—sweeping over my brain till the fact that he was married became intangible. When emotion ebbed, my brain would take control and torture me with the thought that I who had been so proud loved a man who belonged to some one else.

But gradually a more beautiful vision began to dawn—of the deep tenderness of a love which should [160]

not be swayed by emotion or shame. He would still love me, I would still love and serve him with all my heart—that was a thing which could not be changed—but by sacrificing a look or a touch that might hurt its honour, our love would still be beautiful and wonderful, the counterpart of the love which had been my ideal, holding within it the lovely spirit which had shone out of my Mother's eyes.

Thus I courageously and ignorantly looked along that difficult pathway of sacrifice and self-control, the dangers in the way being hidden under the veil of romance which, in spite of the awakening to womanhood, still hid the realities of Life.

Chapter Five

DEXT morning I waited for his coming with breathless suspense. It seemed incredible that after the emotions of the night before I should meet him in the ordinary day-light atmosphere of clerks, and business and typewriters—that I should call him Mr. Wilson and take his letters. Yet the moment passed as if nothing had happened. He greeted me with a constrained "Good morning" and passed on to his desk.

What had I expected—had I not said that it must be forgotten! Yet his apparent carelessness hurt me so much that my papers swam before me in a mist of tears—he didn't care. Then pride helped me to gain self-control; I tried to stifle thought by a multitude of tasks. Yet I was always conscious of his presence, and at the sound of his brusque voice on the telephone, I contrasted it with the warm living tones I had heard. It seemed that last night must be a dream, and then suddenly it was real again, even though it was only the simple request, "Will you take some letters now?" His voice was different when he spoke to me. As I sat down our eyes met; my hurt pride broke in a wave

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of happiness. Thus even so soon my splendid resolution of the night before unconsciously made a readjustment to exclude a look from the things which might hurt the honour of our love.

And thus, though for many days the shock of our dual confession kept us steadily on our guard, the memory of it could not be entirely hidden—it flamed out in a look, a gesture, a softer lowered voice. It coloured our work together, so that in the hours I spent at the office I was happy, and in serving him with all my heart, it seemed that I would find contentment. I felt so sure of myself, so certain that we could go on as before.

Gradually, however, as a week went by and another began, I was conscious of a growing restlessness and abruptness in him which met in me a longing which I would not admit, which I tried to stifle by holding fast to that conception of a love that should not be smirched, but which grew beyond control—a longing to be alone with him again, away from the prosaic atmosphere of the office. How my heart leaped at the excuse when one morning he blurted out abruptly, "Come and have dinner with me to-night—you must—we have to talk this over!" Of course, it had to be talked over. I spent the day in a state of glowing happiness which threw a dreamy unreality over my work.

Just before five-thirty, he leaned over my chair and whispered,

"Take the car to Bownton, and I'll meet you there."

With averted head, I nodded. The secrecy abashed us both. And yet, must I confess it, the sense of adventure and danger added fuel to this intoxicating elation—my mind was muffled, I could only feel just then.

A mile beyond the terminus we found a little restaurant which was almost empty and in a quiet corner we were alone, away from our usual world. I think we both forgot about the excuse of talking it over—as if all the talking in the world would move the stubborn facts, as if we could logically and calmly discuss it, when every look, every gesture said "I love you!" I had the feeling that somehow I had grown very light—that my head was floating around in space. Occasionally the thought came to me—"You are not coming to any decision"—but then it was gone again, I only knew we were together.

As we were drinking our coffee, I made an effort, and whispered,

"We must talk about things."

"I know, but it's not easy to think, is it? It's so much easier to glide."

Glide—that was it—that was the feeling. I seemed to be gliding down an enormous wave—the sensation was intoxicating—at the bottom death might lurk, but meantime I was very happy, nothing seemed to matter.

"I'd like to run away with you, to take you somewhere, anywhere, so long as we were together." Then the excited eagerness in his face changed to solemnity,

"But—you know I must think of the boy—that is why she and I have kept up appearances so long——"

"I know," I interrupted quickly, "we can't do anything to hurt him"—my love of children alone made the thought intolerable—"we can't do anything."

He leaned towards me till I was conscious of nothing but his eyes, of the change in their cold blueness which came when he looked at me—"But you'll come and have dinner with me sometimes—say you will, I'll be content with that—that won't hurt any one."

"We can't," I said desperately, trying to fight against the excuse on which my heart seized, to hold fast to that ideal of love which could only be kept by sacrificing desire, "people would talk—suppose Mr. Roberts——"

"That's true, I'm afraid of Roberts, for you know what he is. If there was any—any scandal—I mean even without cause," he put in eagerly,—"he would give me the sack. And then you would suffer. Even if we went away, I don't think she would divorce me. In any case the boy would suffer. Oh God! What a muddle. I don't know what to do."

"You can't do anything, we must just be friends. We work together, and we must be content with that."

He smiled sadly, "Oh, how little you know. Do you think that friendship will content us?"

"It must, it shall, we must make it," I answered confidently, in my ignorance. "Will you try?"

His lips set in that grim stern line I loved. "I'll try but it will be terribly hard."

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As we went out into the cool darkness he whispered,

"Let me kiss you, then, it will be a sort of goodbye, and we'll try to be just friends."

When I got back to my little room, unconsciously I began to wonder whether there wasn't some way out —it seemed as though there must be. Yet supposing he could give up the boy he loved, that would mean that he should also give up his work which was just as much part of his life. Could I make him happy away from both-would not the love for his boy whom he had deserted stand between us as a menacing shadow—should we not have spoiled the beauty of a little child's life? Quick on the thought came the amazed realisation that already it had come to thisthat I should look for a way out by divorce, shaming the beauty of that wonder-love. I shivered as it seemed that my Mother's voice said sadly, "Oh, Betty, Betty, you who were so proud of your honourable point of view-you who acknowledged marriage as an insurmountable barrier!"

In sad contrition, conscience took control—we would have to go on being friends.

And so we strove again.

Oh, my beloved, how easy it was to say we would be "just friends" while we were together, but as the days crept on, each one increasing our desire to be alone, how that longing shook all our determination,

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buried our conscience, made everything else seem of no account.

There was the incessant temptation to talk things over—any excuse which dulled our consciences for a moment into giving us a few hours together. I began to lose faith in myself. I ought to be strong enough to say "No." I did try once—but his bitter laugh, and "Well, all right, you are wiser than I" seemed to separate me from his unhappiness and I was immediately filled with a dangerous desire to please him the more.

In that lay the core of my weakness; if he had been happy, content only to have me work for him, perhaps my keen wish not to smirch the honour of that ideal love might have been strong enough to help me stifle my own desire for aught else. But when I saw him restless and bitter, knowing that my assent to his plea for "just a harmless little dinner together" would change his mood to a happy humour, the instinct of my deep tenderness was always to say "yes"—and immediately conscience was dulled by the thought of the happiness of being together, until the moment for which we unconsciously waited—when with his arms around me I felt the kiss which made a mockery of farewell in that it increased the certainty of others.

So it came to be a struggle within me—a few hours' happiness with him, and then remorse, misery, loss of self-respect and faith in myself, above all dishonour

to that love which was to hold all goodness. In those desperate hours I could see my Mother's face—no longer with a bright, happy smile, but overcast with sadness and suffering. I tried to shut her out of my thoughts for she added to my misery.

Chapter Six

In the midst of the conflict, a glowing letter came from Kitty—she was the happiest girl in the world, she was going to marry William Hovey! Might she come for the week end and tell me all about it?

I suppose the vanity in every woman prevents her from feeling delighted by the news that any man who has professed to love her has consoled himself with some one else. I did not want William Hovey, I had hardly given him a thought, but he had been in the background as a friend, as some one who loved me. Now he was gone, for friendship would never again be possible—he would be the husband of another woman, a strange being, only interested in the wonderful girl who had seen the value of what I had rejected.

While I despised the boyish love he had given me which was feeble enough to permit so quick a change of feeling, I admitted that he was sensible—he couldn't get what he wanted, so he took something else—why couldn't I do the same? Bertie Wilfred had written me twice that he would come and see me, and each time I had put him off on the plea of work, for I was afraid that he might discover my secret. Should I tell him to come? Was I a fool to be discontented

with what I could have as his wife—wealth, honour, devotion and probable contentment? Contentment—what a sorry substitute for the overwhelming emotion I felt for the man I loved. I shook myself and shivered: I should be bartering a feeling which was fine in itself for comfort and luxury; it would degrade me to marry any other man thinking as I did about the one.

For a moment I had the instinct to tell Kitty I was too busy, it would be painful to listen to her eulogies about "the only man," then shocked by my selfishness, I wrote her a welcoming letter. It was a new Kitty who got out of the train, a girl I might have passed without recognition had she not run to me and squeezed my arm with a loving gesture. Her face was coloured a delicate pink, her eyes sparkled, she was alive with her happiness which was evidently complete.

I felt jealous and resentful—why should she be happy, when I was suffering? As she poured her gentle confession into my ears—"You know, Betty, at one time I thought William was in love with you, and I almost hated you," a cruel savage desire came to me for one blind moment to strip this glowing happiness away, to see the change in her face as I uttered just four little words—to make her suffer as I was suffering. The wave of savagery frightened me. What was this love doing to me—to me who prided myself on being a sportswoman, above a mean action! The suffering was killing my sense of honour, it certainly was not ennobling me.

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With quick contrition I took her in my arms— "Why, Kitty, William and I have always been good pals. I am so glad that you are happy. I'll write and tell him how lucky he is. When are you to be married?"

Her eyes glowed softly—"Very soon," she answered shyly.

That night, looking at her as she slept, I wondered why Life was so unjust. Why was it that here would be one who had never known the childish longing for things out of reach because of poverty, who had never known the stress and strain of earning a living, and who yet passed into the further peace and happiness of a marriage with the one she wanted—while there would be another whose life was all conflict, whose emotions and feelings were in continual stormy strife, whose desires were always unfulfilled and yet always calling forth an insistent fight towards attainment?

My envy of her lot was so great that it forced the tears to my eyes—marriage no longer seemed a dull and staid existence—with him it would be glory. She would have the man she loved, a home—children. I saw myself always striving, always alone, without the children which had been in the background of my dreamy visions. Sorrow at their banishment was intensified by the new knowledge of what it would mean to hold his child in my arms.

I began to know a furious and torturing jealousy of the woman who blocked the way—who had known the glory and let it slip from her grasp. She had what

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I wanted—the right to face the world with him; she had had so much more, for now I admitted to myself that I wanted to be his wife. And I blamed her more and more bitterly that she had left him free to love and not to marry.

Chapter Seven

WINTER had set in with a will; there was skating on all the ponds and in the clean and joyous exhilaration which came from the exercise and biting air I found many hours of peace. I smiled rather sadly at the thought of the pleasure that one-time child would have taken in the fine boots and skates I was now able to buy, and in the improvement of my performance. Sometimes he would be there, and then for a few short minutes, there would be glowing happiness, as hands clasped, we swept over the ice, our genuine pleasure in the sport freeing us from the usual haunting sense of wrong-doing in being together.

There were days when he was bitter and reckless, when it seemed as though he gave up struggling to do right, when he seemed to try and dominate me to his will, and then in giving him a paper, his hand would close on mine, crushing it, forcing the knowledge of his power over me, and meeting my eyes defiantly, he would dare me to be angry. And I, alas—what use to seek for anger, when that flaming emotion shook me at his touch, burying thought and conscience under its flood. Once as he pleaded that I would meet him that evening, and I answered unhap-

pily, "Oh, don't ask me to!" the recklessness in his face softened—"Forgive me, dearest, I'm a brute to tempt you." And then immediately I wished that he would compel me to say "yes" as I saw the promised happiness fade away.

Once he stood beside my chair, so close that he almost touched me, seeming to find pleasure in the confusion of letters which came from my trembling fingers, watching till I let them fall from the keys. And when I looked up, perhaps my eyes pleaded, for he turned away abruptly and I saw him no more that day.

There were other days when his boyish bubbling humour triumphed, as on a morning in early February when he came in smiling, "Good morning, ma'am. It's my birthday to-day. I'm thirty-eight."

"Thirty-eight!" I repeated, mechanically, as I thought how old that would usually seem to me.

He leaned a little nearer—"It would be *polite* to say 'you don't look it'!" Immediately my youthful sense of fun leaped to meet the gleaming mischief in his eyes—

"I never sacrifice politeness to the truth," I answered obviously, but demurely.

"All right!" he retorted with that jolly devil-maycare laugh which made him look so young—"All right—I'll make you pay for that!"

And later in the day when I was busily at work, having forgotten the mock threat, I heard a stern voice call "Miss Marchand!" When I went in he was

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sitting with an angry frown on his face—"Just look at those letters—they're full of mistakes—what have you been thinking of!"

I stood aghast at his tone, looking stupidly at the letters, as I stammered, "I'm sorry, I'll read them over again." I was turning away when he began to chuckle—"Caught, aren't you?" My feigned indignation broke under his infectious laugh, as I grinned, "I admit that you scored!"

Then the mischief faded out of his eyes as he said softly,

"What a darling you look when the smiles ripple over your face, so young and vivid and full of life—I——" His hand clenched and I turned back to my work with my heart leaping.

But I was beginning to be afraid. In the gradual loss of unconsciousness I realised slowly the power of this passion of love. The veil of romance which I had tried to keep around my shattered dreams was fading and I faced the fear that I had not the strength to keep that stern border line I had thought to set between honour and dishonour—that this love was too powerful to be wrapped in misty dreams, and that the wonder and exaltation of it that I had thought to keep unsullied were being spoiled by secrecy and furtiveness.

My frank camaraderie with the boys in the office was touched by the continual thought—if they knew—and the picture of the resulting nods and grins burned to the root of my self-respect. For I was beginning

to know that to them there would be no wonder or terrible grandeur in our love, no pity for the deep tenderness and emotion I felt for this one man out of all the world—that to them it would be associated with those same nods and grins, turning it to something horrible, sordid, degrading.

And my influence with my girls was spoiled by the same thought—if they knew. When I had remonstrated with one of them because she had let her fault be blamed on another, saying scornfully, "Why didn't you admit that you had done it? Any one can make mistakes, but it wasn't very honourable to let Miss Wren take the blame, was it?"—the words faded on my lips and I hurried out of the room. Honourable! How self-scorn bit and burned me.

I was beginning to be afraid. And one night, as I lay awake, bitterly going over the same arguments, the same excuses, I seemed to hear a voice say, "You must go away!"

It was like a knife in my heart—go away, away from everything which made life worth living—never see him again. My whole being shrank from the awful empty abyss of a future without him. With the hopelessness of youth I could see *nothing* before me. With a shudder, I stubbornly put the suggestion out of my mind,—I would *not* leave him.

But as the days went on and excuses for being together became more frequent, as there was more passion in his kiss, less resistance in mine, the feeling that flight was the only way out came again and again.

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Womanhood

If I did not go soon, I should not have the courage or the strength to go at all. The long hours we worked together, touched by the same admiration for each other's skill and interested in the same things, the stolen evenings with their intoxication and danger were fast binding our hearts and wills into a tie which would become too strong to break.

There were times when I determined to stay-when recklessly I shut my eyes to that vague fear of the future, deciding with savage desperation that I would be happy, that I would seize happiness by any way that offered, that nothing mattered so much as this dominating love. And now my mind grasped the meaning of those sordid stories in the papers—other people had so decided, with what terrible results. And always in the background was my pride in my family, my upbringing which tolerated no shade of right and wrong,-always the thought of my Mother, on whom my wrong-doing would somehow reflect shame. If I acted deliberately in the face of those feelings of honour and truth, I should never again be able to look people in the face, and I had already known the torture which came through the loss of that old habit of frank and unashamed action. I had courage enough to defy the world's opinion; if I could have had love by paying the price of cold looks and biting jest, I was ready, but because this price included one certain thing, the injuring of a child's life, as well as others possible, it was unthinkable. And the taking of love in secrecy, taking it and still keeping the respect of

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men by appearing other than I was—this hurt my soul, shamed and degraded me—this was foreign to the nature of the child who despised Aunt Jane's subterfuges over the black eye—who had been taught to regard deceit and secrecy as the greatest loss of virtue that she could know. . . . "Betty is honest and true, incapable of deceit"—oh, my little Mother, who knows what he may do, till he is tempted!

In my despair and perhaps for the first time in my life, I prayed with my whole soul, asking, imploring. Because my usual self-reliance could not find a way out, I threw myself on the help of God, asking a miracle. And in my longing I was afraid of the thought that she might die—afraid that it might ascend as a prayer and condemn me as desiring the death of a human being.

No help came. I lost the faith I had, seeming to live between grey walls, heavy with oppression, shutting out hope, except for those dazzling moments of happiness when I was with him and every other feeling excluded.

And then Fate willed the thing which gave me strength to act. I was sitting alone in the gallery of the Royal, waiting for the play to start, when a party of four came into the stalls. I looked envyingly at the splendour of costume of the two women, when one turned her head. In her cold haughty features I recognised the woman who had been grandiloquently written up in the local newspaper—Mrs. Wilson.

And as I saw him follow, pride rose, choking me, [178]

filling me with savage rage—she had the right to sit by his side, the right to demand respect, comfort, care, yet she gave him nothing, while I—— Unseeing, dizzy, I waited till the curtain went down on the first act before going out into the air, away from this place in which her presence degraded me. And as I passed the gaily lighted entrance, he was standing there, smoking a cigar with the other man of the party. Seeing me he made an unconscious movement forward, his face flaming into light, but I bowed coldly and passed on.

An hour later I had mailed my resignation to Mr. Roberts.

I awoke to a sullen resentment against the decision I had had to make, which perhaps showed in my quiet "Good morning," for he paused beside my chair to whisper, half mischievously, "Still cross, dearest?"

But when I raised my eyes, he was shocked to seriousness. "What is the matter?"

"I am going away."

"What!" he almost shouted.

"Hush, don't forget appearances," I retorted bitterly.

His face cleared. "Oh, you silly old dear, you're cross because of last night—as though you need be, I was bored stiff—but we have to go out together, sometimes, just to——"

"Keep up appearances—how I hate that phrase. But it's not just that. I've known I would have to go. I've sent in my resignation to Mr. Roberts."

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Anger flamed in his eyes. "He's not here to-day. I'll get the letter and tear it up. You shan't go."

"It would be no use. I am going. Wait until tonight when we can talk."

"I'll wait, but it won't make any difference," he said emphatically.

All day I tried to steel my resolution. As I faced him across the table I felt old, weary, leaden. "I must leave you, I can't struggle any longer."

"I won't let you go." He grasped my hand till his knuckles stood out white, and woman-like, I, who had known no master, thrilled to his determination. But I pressed my arm against the sharp edge of my chair so that pain might keep that rising emotion at his touch away from my brain.

"I must go," I whispered, and the strain forced the tears to my eyes.

At that he was all contrition, his tone changing to a reasoning tenderness. "You can't go, dear, I couldn't do without you in the office—everything would get in a muddle and I couldn't bear to see another girl sitting in your chair—I'd want to kill her. Stay and we'll be friends. I won't ask you to come out with me, anything if you'll only stay. I can't lose you altogether, you can't want to make me so unhappy."

Desperately I tried to harden my heart; when he was fighting me, it was easier,—this insidious tenderness broke into my resolution. "You're not the only one who is unhappy, you don't think about me."

"I'm always thinking of you—trying to tear a [180]

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way out." Then, after a long pause, "Will you be happier away from me?"

My heart cried no, no, a thousand times, but I answered sullenly, "Perhaps I shall suffer less, my pride won't be tortured. I can't be unhappier than I am," and he leaned back quickly, his face settling into hurt anger as he said quietly,

"All right, then I won't try to make you stay."

I had won the fight, but how little I desired the victory. When I interviewed Mr. Roberts next day, his astonishment and dismay, his questions and wonderment almost made me hate him.

Fortunately I had much to do. Having taken up the burden of so much detail, I could not let it drop and make things harder for my Chief. He would discuss nothing with me; for as soon as he had realised that I was determined, his attitude was of grieved injury—"I needn't have worried myself sick, you don't love me after all," he had said bitterly. And though it hurt me intolerably, it heightened my deep strong tenderness for him which perhaps had in it something maternal—in spite of his ability, his dominating will, he was just like a great boy who can't have what he wants—yet how I longed to make him happy.

As he would not express an opinion about new arrangements, I had to make them at my own discretion. I took Miss Cummins into my office and trained her to the routine of his work; she was already familiar with some of it, was bright and eager and would probably make a good secretary after some experi-

ence. As head of the typists' room I engaged a new girl, as none of the four already in it was able to wield authority.

When I told him what I had done, he answered, "All right, I don't care."

How I got through those days before I could feel free, I don't know; perhaps his cold anger helped; though it hurt me so much it dulled the longing for his touch. We said good-bye automatically as though we had been nothing to each other, and I went home sick with pain.

But in the evening as I was packing, a message came to my room that Mr. Wilson wanted to speak to me.

"Where—do you mean he's here?" I tried to speak quietly though my heart was thumping.

"Yes, miss, he's in the drawing room."

I stood for a moment outside, trying to calm my expression before facing the crowd who usually congregated there. His manner was perfect. "I am sorry to trouble you again, Miss Marchand, but I can't find those records of the plates we've ordered. I wonder if you would mind coming back for a moment to find them?"

"They're in the special filing cabinet—under Records—P."

He was looking straight into my eyes. "No, I think you're mistaken, I have looked there."

"Oh, have you, then certainly I'll come and find them." Every one knew I was going to London in the morning—there was nothing extraordinary to them

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in the request. But as I put on my hat, I thought breathlessly, how dared he!

When we were outside I drew back. "I'm not coming with you, why do you tempt me—you're cruel when you know how hard it is——"

My incoherent reproaches did not disturb his quiet self-control. "I didn't come to tempt you, I had to say good-bye to you. When you went out of the door, I realised at last that you were leaving me. I've been such a brute since you told me you were going, when all the time I knew you were only doing right. You won't remember that, will you, only that I love you."

The narrow ugly street swam before me in a mist of tears. "I know. I hope everything will be all right."

"You're a darling to have taken so much trouble. You'll let me know when you are settled and what you are doing?"

"It would be better not to," I hesitated, "it would be better to make an end-"

"I must know that you are all right, that you have a new job. I won't write back if you insist. You must promise," he answered with some of his old vehemence. "Good heavens, do you suppose I could go on, not knowing whether you were—in need, or——"

"All right, I promise, now good-bye."

This time there was no passion in our kiss, only the aching sadness of farewell, blurring the hours that followed into semi-consciousness.

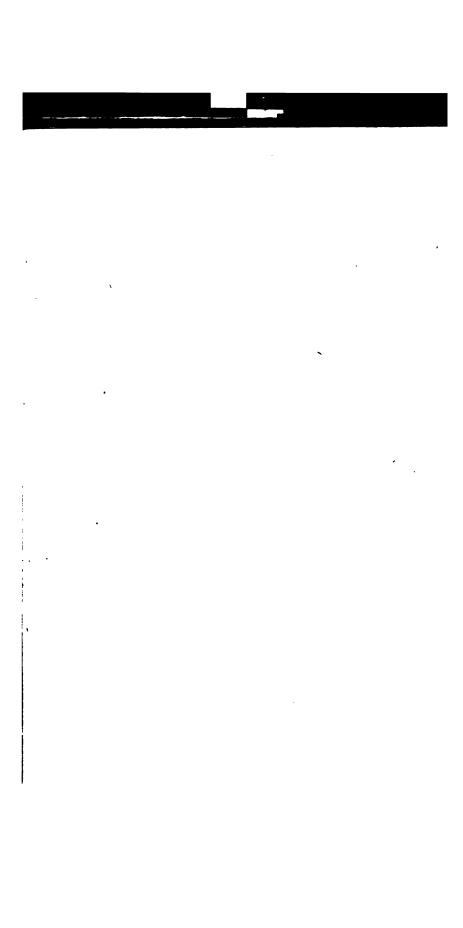
Next morning I found myself in the train for Lon-[183]

don with my small store of savings, without a job, without caring whether I found one or not, almost without hope. I had not told any one of my sudden decision to leave the steel works—I must find work before breaking the news to Aunt Jane, or she would inevitably think that I had lost my senses—and the thought of making explanations which could not be near the truth was distasteful to my hurt soul. No one mattered, I hated the whole world.

Then as I opened my bag to take out a handkerchief, I saw the fountain pen which my girls had given to me with an evident sincerity of affection, and as I thought of the meagre pennies which had gone to its purchase, my heart softened a little.

And so I journeyed to London—the goal of my youthful ambitions. But how empty and stupid and weary it all seemed, how the years stretched in endless array, for I was only just twenty-three years old.

BOOK FOUR: THE GREAT TEMPTATION



BOOK FOUR: THE GREAT TEMPTATION

Chapter One

In the midst of the bustling crowd of strange faces at Euston, the thought inevitably came that out of the five or six million people who lived in London, I did not know a solitary creature—then I had to revise it to include the Wilfreds.

I had left instructions at my late abode that my trunk was to be sent on as soon as I gave an address, and with only the hand bag which carried immediate necessities, I set out in search of a boarding-house. As I walked through the streets of the place which had always called to my romantic love for historic things, the old zest for adventure began to creep through my blood, dispelling some of the lassitude; I remembered an address of which Kitty had once spoken, after the visit of an aunt who had stayed there and found it clean and cheap.

It proved to be one of a row of exactly similar houses, all ugly, with tall straight fronts. I rang a bell and a woman with a pale face opened the door. Her two black eyes peered with malignant intensity out of the surrounding mass of white.

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"Have you any vacant rooms?"

"Only two-first floor and top."

From a rapid calculation, I judged that the price of the latter would be more likely to suit me. "I'd like to see that on the top floor, please."

Grudgingly she opened the door a little wider. We travelled up three flights of stairs; at the top of yet another which creaked crazily under our steps was a tiny room. The solitude of it appealed to me—there was only one other on the same floor.

"How much is this?"

"A pound a week."

"With board?"

"Breakfast and dinner-lunch is extra."

"I shan't want lunch, thank you. I'll take it right away."

Her eyes fastened on to my hand bag—"You have luggage?"

I tried a propitiatory smile. "This is all I have with me—my trunk is coming on from Bermanton, as soon as I send this address."

"We require a week in advance, without luggage," she answered sullenly. Perhaps my wrath at her odious manner flamed into my eyes, for she added reluctantly, "It's the usual custom."

"Very well," I assented haughtily and paying her from my slender store, breathed more freely when the door had closed behind her. The food at dinner proved to be fair, and I liked the aloofness of my little room. I did not want to talk with any one;

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my hurt nerves needed healing before taking up the business of life again.

For a week I made no effort to find a job, just wandering around London. The age and historical significance of this centre of my nation took hold of me, and during those days I lived in the romantic past which had always held such fascination. where Charles was executed, where lay the bones. or rather the dust of ancient kings and queens, of men who had fought in the Crusades, who had lived in the time when knightly chivalry was in full sway. As I looked at their tombs, I began to wonder—what did their living, and fighting and dying matter now? What use for them to have suffered pain and weariness in that ancient fight for an ideal which now seems so visionary? What did they gain by leaving their homes and wives and children and dying before the walls of Jerusalem? What would it matter to a new generation that I had struggled and sufferedwas it worth while trying to do right? I had a crushing sense of the uselessness of it all, of my helplessness as an individual; at that time I found no solution to this problem of living; it was many years before a dim understanding came to lighten the way.

But as I grasped the hands of old soldiers who had fought in our wars and were now spending a peaceful old age before they "crossed the border," as I poked my nose among the treasures of the British Museum and the vaults under the Guildhall, losing myself among things so old that they seemed eternal,

the love of London entered into my heart, became a part of my being, and during those first few days I knew some measure of peace—a peace which I forgot might be so much due to the merciful dullness which comes after strain and sorrow, and which makes the subsequent ache seem all the keener.

And then one day as I was wandering I found I had still further to revise my estimate of the number of acquaintances in London, for I met a girl with whom I had gone to school. After chatting about the old times, I asked,

"What are you doing up here?"

"I'm with Oldhams; I'm secretary to the boss."

"And who may Oldhams be?"

She opened her eyes—"Why, don't you know them? They're the biggest cloak and suit people in London."

"Pity my ignorance, but I'm just from the Provinces," I laughingly confessed. "I've come to London to find a job. Have Oldhams anything to give away?"

"I don't think there is a vacancy, but you might try and see Moore. He's awfully keen about finding people who can be trained to sell. I'll mention you to him, if you like."

"It's awfully good of you. I shall be much obliged if you will, and I can come and see him any time."

A few days later I had a note. "Please come and see me at three o'clock to-morrow afternoon." That a busy man, as indicated by the brief request, should grant an interview, sounded hopeful.

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Very carefully I dressed my hair and put on a wellfitting dark blue suit, so that I looked smart as well as business-like.

I was shown in to a beautiful office. A short fat man was sitting at the desk, and I had just thought how unusually unalert was the mass of his pale and heavy face, when he looked up at my entrance. And I was immediately aware of a pair of extraordinary grey eyes under heavy bushy eyebrows, eyes that seemed to see right through me.

"Good morning, Miss Marchand," in a tired voice, "won't you sit down? My secretary tells me you want a job. What have you been doing?" I told him the experience I had had.

"Nothing to do with clothes, has it?"

"No, but business methods apply to everything under the sun, don't they?" I answered eagerly.

A suspicion of a smile touched his heavy lips. "I can get plenty of girls who make good secretaries, who can earn two, even three pounds a week, but it's the ones who are worth high salaries who are so hard to find, who can do things on their own initiative, who are clever in executive positions, who don't in short have to be told what to do, those are the women I am looking for."

"That's the kind of position I want to work up to.
I don't want to be a secretary all my life."

"But have you the qualities, the ability, the initiative for anything above a mechanical job? That's the point, not what you want."

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"Why don't you try me?" I said boldly.

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "There's only one vacancy coming here—that is my manager's secretary. She is a good worker, Miss Marchand, when she's here. That is what she's going for, absence without leave. It's a thing I won't tolerate for one moment, it is one of my fads. If any one's ill, they must send a doctor's certificate—if they're subject to—shall we say headaches, it seems to be a good excuse!—then they are no use to me. It's only a two pound job, but it would give me a chance of seeing what you can do. Do you want to try?"

"Yes."

"All right, come in on Monday morning, 9 o'clock." I walked back to the boarding house feeling immense pride that I had so soon landed a job. It seemed like a good opening; if I were worth it, Mr. Moore might give me bigger work, thus leading upward in that career which was all the more important now that those vague dreams of marriage were at an end.

So I sat down and wrote to my dear as I had promised, telling him not to worry about my prospects as I had found what seemed like a fine beginning and hoped for fame and fortune with Oldhams. Because I had so severely to restrain myself from pouring out my longing and unhappiness, the letter sounded stiff and cold. And yet though he had promised not to write, I hoped for an answer, and when it did not come, my common sense mocked my heart that it would not be content with the decision I had made.

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To Aunt Jane I merely wrote that I was tired of Bermanton and had come to London to a new job—she would think me crazy, anyway—and that the very first holiday which came to me, I would visit Linesmoor, and I looked forward to seeing her and Margaret. For some time I hesitated about writing to Bertie Wilfred; as he was in London it was likely that he might seek me out—had I learned to cover feelings with a smile sufficiently to hide my secret from his keen eyes? I thought that I should have to risk it, as he would certainly learn of my new abode from Margaret.

And then, with all my will power, I tried to turn my thoughts into my new work, so that when night came I would be too tired to think of aught else.

Chapter Two

Y new boss, Mr. Croft, was a man of great charm and ability, but he was indolent and of delicate health. I half suspected that Mr. Moore only kept him because of his undoubted success in salesmanship, due to his popularity with the head buyers of the concerns with which we dealt. His quiet easy-going ways were a trial to my energy, but I determined to learn everything I could. I found he did not object to my asking questions-indeed he was always glad to explain why he had, or had not done things. Gradually as I got to know him better, I suggested that I should write letters dealing with certain subjects which he could afterwards check and tell me where I had gone wrong. This arrangement pleased both of us. It saved him some trouble, for occasionally my letters hit the mark, and it helped me enormously, for little by little I got into the way of dealing with things as if I were responsible, and deciding what I should do if I alone had to deal with them.

I was rather surprised to find that out of the fifteen people in the office, ten were women, two being heads of departments. These two seemed to be of a different type from the stenographers and secretaries I had hitherto known in the business world.

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Though they were both young, they had positions of responsibility, interviewing buyers, appointing travellers, reporting directly to Mr. Moore. From the first I recognised in their keen interest in their work, their enthusiasm over a month's record in sales, their quiet acceptance of equality when talking to Mr. Moore, a hint of my own ambition. They drew good salaries, had secretaries of their own, and certainly might be considered as having climbed more than half way up the ladder of success. They inspired me, turning into concrete plans my desire to get on.

Mr. Moore's secretary was a good-natured girl whose thoughts did not seem to soar much above pretty clothes and admiration. To her, marriage was a foregone conclusion—the second party to the contract was of less importance than the fact that he should be well-off and not too ugly. She asked me to her home but her people were of the same type, shallow, money - worshipping, unintellectual - and though we went to an occasional theatre or lunch together, we remained on a basis of distant amiability. One of the two heads of departments I liked immensely -from a distance! Naturally our work did not touch and I could not suppose that she would be interested in "one of the secretaries." The other girls were ordinary, quite friendly and nice to me, but none of them touched my heart. I was never able to form those brief but violent friendships on which other girls seemed to thrive: I should have thought that I was cold had it not been for the memory of my pas-

sionate adoration of my Mother, and for this other love which was always aching in my heart. I remembered my Mother's protective pity as she sensed this trait she knew would bring me sorrow.

At the boarding house there was no one who seemed to have any immediate desire for my friendship, except a middle-aged woman named Miss Adams, to whom I gave a warm gratitude in that she "mothered" me so sweetly. Thus Bertie Wilfred was the only real friend I had in this big city. He had 'phoned to me the day after receiving my letter and we had lunched together. He was so friendly, so interested in my new work, so apparently forgetful of that evening in Bruges that I was grateful to him; how much I liked him, how happy I should have been with him if that other memory were not continually with me! Perhaps the desire to hide it made me more than usually gay, for before we left he said smiling, "Your new work must agree with you, you are more lively than ever!"

"I'm sorry I can't say the same of you," I retorted, "I think Law is making you serious. Don't you like your work, in spite of making such a hit in your first case?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, yes, I'm interested, but sometimes I think 'what's the use of all the energy?—it hasn't helped in the way I hoped."

I coloured at the allusion to my changeability and went on more eagerly to cover my remorse,

"Energy is always of use—it's always good to get somewhere; even if there is nothing else in Life, the [196]

realisation of ambition must help—it must be consoling to think that difficulties have been overcome." I spoke partly to reassure my own indifference.

"That's rather a sad creed for a pretty girl of twenty-three, Betty"; he was looking at me quietly, keenly. "Doesn't love and marriage enter into your programme at all?"

"No," I answered flippantly. "I'm a modern woman —I want freedom, independence, the right to make my own career, to achieve by my own powers—I must go, Bertie."

I turned round quickly to hide the tears which were scorching my eyes—freedom, independence—emptiness in comparison with the fullness of life which I had glimpsed and lost.

"Take care it doesn't make you hard, Betty—that would be a pity."

I left him abruptly, hurrying to the work which stifled thought.

But gradually as work became easier, the stifling of thought became more difficult, and as the newness wore away, as the charm of London became an ascustomed thing, I began to know the utter loneliness of a big city. Work took on another aspect now that it no longer held the man I loved—how I missed his daily presence, his brusque voice which was yet different when it spoke to me—there were times when in spite of all my efforts to concentrate, longing for him would overwhelm me and my head would fall on to

the cold hard bars of my typewriter, as pain cut into my heart.

So time dragged on until Easter, an occasional lunch or dinner with Bertie the only thing which broke the increasing monotony. As I took the train North for the short vacation which I had promised to spend with Aunt Jane, I was conscious of relief in going to a place where many faces would be familiar. Linesmoor looked strangely altered, small, insignificant and rather dirty; even Aunt Jane's house was not the palace it had seemed to me when I had first visited it as a long-legged child of twelve. But Margaret was as beautiful as ever—"How is it that no one has run away with you?" I asked smiling with pleasure at the picture she made.

"Perhaps it's because Mother has not changed her mind," she said roguishly.

"You mean she's still set on your marrying Bertie?"

She nodded her head, then with the colour flooding her face, added shyly, "I don't believe I mind, I think I'm rather in love with him."

I looked at her in wide-eyed amazement—in love—and this shy, gentle, sunny thinking bore the same name as the reckless yet deep and tender emotion which had nearly overcome old habits of truth and common sense in me! Then I realised that it was Bertie whom she thought she loved. Truly I seemed to have the capacity for making sorrow in every life which touched mine—what was the matter with me—was I selfish, or was it that unconscious acceptance

of things as they were instead of seeking cause and reason which brought trouble in its train?

"He's coming up to-morrow in his flier. I told him you would be here and I wanted to give you a good time, you work so hard."

I took her pretty face between my hands—"You are a dear, Margaret, you like to make people happy, don't you?"

"Of course I do-don't you?"

"I don't know—I'm afraid I'm rather a pig at times," I laughed ruefully, envying her her sweet gentle nature.

I was surprised to find that Aunt Jane and I came very close to being good friends—since it was not likely that she had altered, I supposed that it must be that life was hammering into me a wider tolerance for people's fads and fancies, a more sympathetic understanding of their point of view. It was with vague thoughts of this kind that I set out next day for the promised visit to Kitty—Margaret electing to stay at home for Bertie's coming.

As I walked alone through the lanes to Little Torbey, I thought of the Mother who once had been there to welcome me home—how gladly would I now have gone to her and put my face in her lap, finding comfort. There was the tree which had wreaked such mischief on my dress—even the bough with its rotten splintered end remained unchanged, while the children who had sat upon it had grown to manhood and womanhood.

As I looked down, a figure came towards me—for a moment in my dreams it seemed that I was back again in the childish days, for it was Nettie. Poor Nettie, with her two short years of riches and gaiety, as she had shone gaily and daringly in the social light of Linesmoor—then whispers, scandal, and finally a divorce which had even reached the local papers of Bermanton. That was many months ago, since which she had faded into oblivion. She was still daringly dressed, her head had not lost its saucy tilt, but as we were passing, my heart went out to her in the thought that perhaps underneath her apparent composure she was suffering.

"Nettie!" I called softly, "don't you remember me, Betty?"

"Hello," she answered gaily enough, "how's the world using you?"

"Fairly well, I've just got a new job in London which seems promising—and you?"

Her face hardened—"I'm all right. I suppose you know."

"Yes—I—am sorry. If you're not in a hurry, won't you walk back with me and we can talk—I'm just going to see Kitty."

"That little prig—she makes me sick with her airs of smug happiness. She won't speak to me now and once she'd smile for a week if I looked at her. It's funny, isn't it, how things change?"

"Funny—and sad," I answered slowly.

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"So you find that too,"—she looked at me keenly, "you're not happy either."

I shook my head, it did not seem necessary to keep on the mask with this woman who had also suffered.

"Poor old Betty," she said gently, "with her ideals and illusions—even those did not keep you happy."

"I think the illusions have just about vanished—the ideals—well, they keep struggling."

"They're not worth it," she said bitterly, "nothing's worth struggling for—enjoy things while you have them, and after!——" Her shrug was expressive. Was this the answer to my queries at the tombs of those old Crusaders, was this creed of eat, drink and be merry the only one which brought happiness, even for a time, and after—you paid? I hardly knew whether I envied her her creed as I answered,

"I'm not made like that, perhaps I wish I were—I have to keep on struggling. How is your father?"

Her eyes softened into the smile which made her so attractive—"He's better now, for a time he was very ill. The poor old dear was nearly broken up—that was all that hurt me."

I hesitated, then the question broke from me—
"Nettie, why did you do it?"

She looked at me curiously, "I didn't do anything except carry on a stupid flirtation—but appearances were against me and I didn't care. I would have got rid of him at any cost—it was worth even loss of reputation—and you know I never did worry much about people's opinion."

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"You let it go through—and you were innocent?" I asked in amazement.

"Well, innocent is rather a strong term, and appearances were against me, but I wasn't guilty of what the law grants a divorce for. You wouldn't be so surprised if you'd gone through two years of hell as I did."

I could not speak. I thought I had plumbed the depths of misery, of the cruelty of Life, but I realised that in the face of the bitter experience which spoke through her voice, I knew nothing. All I felt was a tremendous sympathy for her—"If you come up to London, will you come and see me?" I asked, in parting.

"Aren't you afraid of me?" she asked with that reckless smile.

"No, I remember the old Nettie."

As I went into Kitty's home, I felt almost dazed by its air of peaceful happiness—it was such a change from the turmoil of Nettie's life and mine. William greeted me as I had expected, with some constraint due to that old love which lay between us, but without a suggestion of unsatisfied longing in his eyes. I mocked that old sense of romance which had even thought of the possibility. Instead he was completely satisfied with his wife, with his house and with the prospect of the child for which they were now preparing.

"I've just seen Nettie," I said, as with careful pride Kitty placed a tea-wagon before the blazing fire.

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Her face hardened—"Did you—one lump or two?" "One," I answered, looking at her curiously. "She must have suffered tremendously."

"She deserves it," her soft voice was vindictive. "I don't want to talk about her, I don't like people who are not—not nice."

"How do you know she is not nice?" I persevered.

She raised her brows—"Gracious, she was divorced, isn't that enough?"

"I don't know, the law sometimes makes a mistake, and anyhow haven't you any pity for her?"

"Not in cases of that kind——" the colour was mantling her cheeks as with an abrupt, "Excuse me, I want some hot water," she went to get it.

William coughed and fidgeted, then with obvious embarrassment he said, "Betty, I wish you wouldn't talk about—about such things, it worries Kitty, and you know she mustn't be worried—now."

I looked at him gravely—"I beg your pardon!" and thereafter I kept my conversation on a basis so far removed from the realities of Life that it could not have ruffled the wings of a butterfly.

I was glad to get away. As I walked through the cool darkness towards Torbey, I thought that such happiness was cramping—it took no account of the world outside, it paid no heed to the cries of those who might be wounded in the fight. Kitty's was the attitude of a narrow, completely satisfied woman who had never been tempted, who bears no pitying love for the struggling, pathetic hordes who are outside

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the barriers of her own happiness. Perhaps it was that in my judgment was something of envy for her enveloping content, but so too was thankfulness that I had not been tempted into marrying William.

Chapter Three

I T was a relief to get back to the wider, more tolerant atmosphere in the room in which Bertie was ensconced in a big chair, while the firelight shone on Margaret's pretty animated face; with the remains of tea which they had just finished it made an intimate, homelike picture—how could he help loving her, she was so dainty and sweet! As Aunt Jane came in, almost at my heels, apologising fussily to Bertie that she was so late—but that wretched meeting had been so prolonged—I caught his eye, and behind her back, deliberately grinned, enjoying his efforts to keep a straight face, in view of her suggestion that he would have been much happier if she had been present!

Bertie took us for long rides—there was just room in his car for three if they were not very fat—and I enjoyed to the utmost the peace and comfort of Aunt Jane's well-managed house, the loving care of Margaret, the unobtrusive attentions of my handsome Bertie, but I was not sorry when it was time for me to go back to work. There was no real peace for me; unrest drove me back to the struggle and turmoil where in the fight to keep my head above water, thought was partially drowned. Bertie offered to drive me back and though Margaret asked him to stay till

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Bessie came later in the week, he answered with his lazy smile, "You forget, ma'am, that I am now a working man, with only the legal holidays!"

The cold brisk air was invigorating—I leaned back and gave myself up to the pleasure of being whirled through it. This rapid motion accorded so well with my restless spirits; gradually it dulled that usual aching longing, leaving a welcome content which gradually sent my dreamy thoughts to dwell on the material comfort of riches—it would be jolly to have cars, and beautiful dresses and all the opera and theatres you wished for without having to wait in long cues and sit on hard seats—and a lovely home with admiration and devotion,—no more loneliness—perhaps children who would call you Mother, loving you so dearly—

Bertie's voice only faintly disturbed my dreams— "Let's get out here and have lunch, it's a nice old place!" I was conscious of the car stopping and of our sitting at a little table in a room with a low ceiling, before a blazing fire, as I still listened to the echo of that "Mother!"

"It's cosy after the sharp air!" I said lazily.

"You weren't cold?" His voice had that touch of solicitude which was rather flattering in the usually indifferent Bertie.

"Not in the least—I enjoyed it thoroughly. Imagine if you had decided to stay, I should have been travelling in a dirty old train."

"I don't miss very many opportunities of being with you," he answered rather bitterly.

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"You spoil me," I smiled at him gently. It was nice to be flattered and looked after. When coffee had been served, I sat back lazily in my chair before the fire—"I feel about as content as a cat on the hearth, it's good to feel comfy and restful, for once."

"I wish you felt it more often"—he was leaning forward, looking at me solemnly. "Generally you seem to be straining away from me, there's always something which eludes me—now, I almost feel as though I had you. Betty, why won't you marry me—I love you, worship you—this talk of yours about a career, independence, is all nonsense—you know you'd have just as much independence as my wife, I don't want just a pretty doll at my side. You would be a tremendous help in my career. I want you, you'd care in time—Betty?"

Would I—and if I didn't I'd have lots of things which counted! Was it any use giving up those things just to be true to that one love which was my ideal—was it? Nettie said it wasn't—and those old Crusaders—didn't they wish they had let their ideal go hang, and stayed at home and grown fat in peace and comfort and riches?

He was by my side, his arms drawing down my head to meet his lips, saying triumphantly, "You're yielding, you will—"

I saw his eager face, his fierce eyes, and I knew. Knew that inner self was still cold and unconsenting to the passion of any man but the one I loved. Shivering with a spasm of revulsion, I shut my eyes so

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that I might not see him—"No, Bertie, don't—you're mistaken—I——"

His arms dropped and I stood up quickly, shrinking away from his touch, trembling as though I were physically sick—and I had thought even for a moment that I could marry him.

"Bertie, forgive me, I hate and despise myself. You understand now that I couldn't marry you." Then in a burst of remorse that I had let him speak I added, "I love some one else."

"Why didn't you tell me, before I---"

"Because he is married."

So by the sharing of my dearly kept secret I did penance for the momentary betrayal of that old ideal of a love which should not be touched by self-interest.

"You—Betty, I can't believe it——" and in his amazed tone I heard the judgment of the world.

For a moment pride kept me silent, then the intolerableness of leaving my love in this cold attitude of suspicion broke through reserve—triumphing over the thought that it would be better for him to despise me— "I know how you feel—I feel it too. But, Bertie, it's not all bad—there's something wonderful—I must make you understand——" I halted, desperately struggling for words—"All through my girlhood I thought of being true to one love, in spite of sorrow, or sickness, even of death, there would be just one man on whom I would lavish all that was me—it was rather romantic and unreal, but it had in it something beautiful, which would make me feel so [208]

good and happy that it would shine on all around me, helping them. . . . Then love came. We struggled to do right so that our love might not be dishonoured -because we were not strong enough, we've given each other up, so that our love may still be something of which we are not ashamed. Oh, Bertie, do you understand!—you can't help loving,—but because I've sacrificed everything I wanted, everything which makes life worth living, because there is nothing before me but work and loneliness,-because even the strongest instinct in me, to make him happy and give up everything to his will, I crushed so that never in the future he might think bitterly, ashamedly of our love—my love is still wonderful and glorious, still shines as an ideal which I can't kill just to take comfort, pleasure, riches, an honoured position,—children -into my grasp. It's not easy to choose work, struggles-loneliness-oh, Bertie, it's the loneliness which hurts the most."

I felt his hands on my bowed head as he said softly, "Forgive me for judging you. If only you could have loved me like this!"

In a sad silence we finished the journey—"Goodbye, Bertie! It's better that it should be that, for a long time anyway."

And a few days later he wrote me that he was going away—"The Governor has had a lot of trouble with an agent in Ceylon; now there's a suit pending, so I suggested that I should look after it. He didn't want me to throw up my career here, but

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I persuaded him that it would only be a temporary setback, and it will be a big relief to him to have the thing straightened out. I have to get away, Betty, I have done nothing but think of you and of what you told me. How I wish that you could be happy. Some day, though, you may forget, and I shall always hope for that time and that we may yet find happiness together."

So I lost the one friend who had helped to keep at bay the loneliness of a great city.

Chapter Four

THOUGH I worked all the harder at the office, there were long hours when I had time to think and long and grow insensibly more bitter that Life would not give me the things I wanted. I missed the camaraderie of Little Torbey with its jolly sports. Here the clubs were in the suburbs, some distance from my boarding house, and too expensive to be included in my modest income.

I hated Sundays—dreaded them for the opportunities they gave for loneliness and thought. The rest of the week was livable; in my zest for work I could just keep under that ceaseless ache and at night I was tired enough to find my feelings somewhat blunted. But there were so many long hours in Sunday; I welcomed almost any means of passing the time and when Miss Adams, who was staying on the Coast, asked me to spend a day with her, I said "yes" most thankfully.

But I had a three-hours' journey there because it was an excursion which waited for anything and everything on the track, and all the time I wondered what he was doing—had he man-like found compensation in work or golf or something which made him

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humble secretary, I should have achieved honour and financial comfort as the crown of my career.

Thus in my life was a curious contrast—success, occasional triumphs and a general satisfaction in my business career—out of it loneliness, emptiness and a growing fear of the future—of a future which held nothing of the glow and glitter and excitement which had once filled the vision of it. I was missing so much of Life—I whose chief desire had been to taste every bit of it. It was on a day of special gloom that I had a wire from Mr. Edwards saying that he was coming up on business—would I have dinner with him that evening—if I could not, would I wire to the Grand Hotel so that he could collect on arrival. I smiled at the thought of his usual impulsiveness—he always did claim that unexpected arrangements were half the charm of life.

I had not seen him since I had left his office, but I had written and told him of the change I had made—that I had at last attained one part of my ambition by getting a post in London, and he had sent me a cheery, friendly letter of congratulations, full of his almost fatherly kindness, wishing me a rapid rise to fame. Now the prospect of seeing his cheerful face delighted me—his jolly smile shone into my loneliness as an oasis in the desert.

"Well, isn't it nice to see you again!" he said, "and how fine you look, London must agree with you."

That was the irony of it—all my heartache and discontent did not make any impression on my boundless [218]

health, and I sometimes smiled mockingly as I read of a heroine whose troubles had made her pale and interesting. My colour was just as good, my eyes shone as brightly—though perhaps they were harder.

The respite from loneliness, the glitter and glow of the Grand, the wine, the delightful food, and the exhilarating cheeriness of this man's personality wrought in me a reckless, high-spirited mood-it was good to forget if only for a short time. Was it just because my eyes were opened that I was conscious of some difference in his attitude? At those old dinners, I had just been an employé, he a kindly boss-now for the first time he seemed to look upon me as a woman. Was it that, man-like, he sensed that I was no longer the ignorant, unconscious child-I know not. I only know that I seemed years older, that we talked now as a man and woman of the world, on a basis of equality. Occasionally I found him looking at me half-curiously—and I met this look defiantly, with sparkling eyes and smiling lips, though in my heart there was the bitterness which wanted to make others suffer. Did it deliberately throw the way open to a new attitude on his part? I do not know, but in the taxi as he took me home, he wanted to kiss

The culmination was like a cold shower on my highstrung recklessness. I had been fencing, playing with fire. With sudden remorse I thought that I must be deteriorating and must show it. For he was married, and I still clung to my old habit of thought which

placed marriage as an unsurmountable barrier, which made the idle flirtations of a married man or woman just as degrading as they had ever seemed because they lowered the standard of my ideal love—that was the further burden of inconsistency I had to bear in loving him. I felt sad and weary—was this new consciousness to lose me all my friends and turn them into beings I did not want, would not have!

With an intense seriousness replacing the reckless smile, I said in a very low voice, "You were a real friend to me when I needed one very much. It would hurt me terribly if anything spoiled this friendship. I have often thought how good you were to me—somehow lately I have realised just how good you were, and I thank you with all my heart."

For the first time since I had known him he looked embarrassed, not I believe because of his impulse, but at the idea of being called "good." It seems strange that a man will face a charge of wickedness with a smiling face, but at a hint that he has done a virtuous deed, he blushes like a schoolboy.

"God knows I am not good," he said half-solemnly, half-bitterly.

"You were to me—that is all I want to remember."

"Well, you see you were such a child. I felt responsible for you in a way, though I always admired you"—with a little smile. I let it pass; because he did at this particular minute, he thought he always had.

"That one deed will make a white cross in your [220]

record," I said lightly, to escape from that undercurrent of shame.

"I shall need it, there are a lot of black ones! But we are friends, then?"

"We are—I need every friend I have."

And so I strove and failed and suffered with a shamed contrition and strove again. There was something in me which would not deliberately consent to a path of wrong-doing, but again that something was so often hidden by momentary impulses of bitterness or recklessness or sheer bravado. How often I thought that I could have been good always if I could have had the man I loved.

Chapter Six

I HAD been with Oldhams for about six months when I was called to the telephone one day by our exchange operator—"Mr. Widsen calling you." He was a client with whom I was just trying to close a deal, Mr. Croft being away. I took up the receiver with my mind full of the business details, and with a cheery "Good morning!" I ran right into the argument which I hoped would close the matter.

A voice interrupted, "Is that Miss Betty Marchand?"

Unconsciously my hand tightened on the instrument. "Yes, isn't that Mr. Widsen?"

"No,-don't you know me?"

Recognition cut through the web of business matter with which I had filled my mind.

It was he.

The shock was so great that my throat almost closed and my voice dropped to a strangled whisper. For a moment I felt fear that the struggle had begun again, and then over all a dizzying, surging rush of emotion burst over my brain, sending the blood pounding through my heart and veins, drowning the dead, weary existence of the last few months.

It was he. I would see him again. With the self[222]

control which had become habitual, I tried to keep the joy from bubbling into my voice and leaning against the desk to steady my shaking limbs, I answered the voice which was now shouting, "Hello, hello," not understanding my silence.

"Hello! Yes, I know who it is."

"I want to see you at once."

"I can't leave the office for about two hours."

"All right, I'll wait that long. Then you will have dinner with me? I'll meet you at Charing Cross. What time?"

"Say eight o'clock, I'll have to go and change."

"All right, good-bye till then."

Under my excitement was a smiling tenderness at the thought that he was still the same masterful man. During the next two hours I tried to become calm, to tell myself that it was useless, that nothing had altered, the same existence would have to go on again. But my brain which I thought had been steadily gaining control through so many months seemed suddenly useless. I could not think, I could only feel. Shutting the desk with a bang, I went back to my boarding house to dress—how carefully I chose the clothes which seemed to suit me best.

When he grasped my hand I could not speak and almost in silence we walked to one of those cosy, confidential little restaurants which abound in Soho. There was only one table occupied of the half dozen which the place boasted, and when we had chosen another farthest away and the old fatherly waiter had

retired to a discreet distance after serving us, we seemed alone.

So in the dim light of that murky little room I gazed again at the face I had not seen for so long. I was conscious of an unusual mood in him—of excited buoyancy, with an undernote of intense determination, almost recklessness. He seemed so virile, so full of life, so much of the dominating man that I felt a little frightened. At first we could not talk, our hearts were beating too rapidly, we were too full of the intense happiness of being together. Then as we made a pretense at eating, I tried to ask him about all the people I had known,—if Miss Cummins had made a good secretary, what he had been doing—little trivial questions which sounded absurd when uttered in that high note which excitement brought into my usually deep full voice.

Suddenly he leaned forward, looking at me with intent eager eyes. "What is the use of talking this nonsense? I have been doing nothing. I have only wanted you, and now I have come to get you."

My heart gave a bound which made me dizzy. His eyes were drawing every atom of will and resistance out of me—my head whirled, I was conscious of nothing but his nearness.

"What do you mean?" I managed to whisper.

"I have tried to do without you. I've left you alone for six months because I wanted to be fair to you. I've thought of the boy and everything till I am nearly mad—now I'm through thinking, I want you whatever

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happens—unless you are happy without me—are you?"

Happy without him! I could not lie and say "yes." His look drew the truth out of me. "No," I breathed.

"Then what is the use of fighting against this? Every one deserves happiness. Let's forget about every one and everything."

I tried to speak, but I could think of nothing—no argument, no common sense. I only felt, I only knew that I was happier than I had ever thought to be.

He read acceptance in my silence. Into his eyes sprang the look of a man who sees what he wants coming into his grasp. "I want you to come back with me, back to our work, together; oh, we can be so happy."

"But things are just the same, how can we be happy?"

He leaned over still further and lowered his voice to the barest whisper. "They won't be the same. You know how I love you, how you love me. What does anything else matter? Come away with me now, for a few glorious days together, and then we'll go back to work, still to be together."

The voice I loved, my longing, the empty months behind were like a swift flowing stream carrying me on and on. I was dimly conscious that if I did not make some struggle I should drown, but I was too happy to care.

As in a dream I left the restaurant. He whistled a passing taxi and I heard him say "Victoria!" With

his arm around me, his voice thrilled through my ear—"Oh, my dear, I will look after you, I will make you happy. You shan't regret it, and no one need ever know."

No one need ever know—the words cut through the cloud of feeling numbing my brain-they rolled around it in stupid repetition like mocking demons—no one will ever know-no one-slowly a picture grew of a woman whose eyes were a little furtive, always hiding, always afraid-of a love no longer splendid but shamed by secrecy, grovelling in the dust. . . . dust? "She may fall and defile her head in the dust if you leave her without help at some moments of her life. . . ." Came the vision of my Mother's shining face, of her beautiful creed, of her faith in me-she too would know-she too, somehow, in some way, would be shamed, because the woman with the furtive eyes would be her daughter. Never again should I feel the quick sense of her nearness, for living in a maze of deception and lies, I could not bear the light of her love. . . . Oh, my Mother, help me to struggle-help me!

He drew me closer—his face was coming nearer. I was afraid of that tremendous force within me which was longing for the pressure of his lips. "Don't kiss me yet," I gasped, "wait!"

"All right, dearest," he smiled tenderly. "I will wait just a little while longer."

The taxi stopped at Victoria. I had no plans, I did not know what to do, but I must get away some[226]

where, a long way off, where he could not plead with me, where my own feelings could not turn traitor and call him back.

"Stay here a moment," he said, "while I get some tickets."

I felt dazed. In a few moments it would be too late—where could I go? I could not think, but as my eyes roved wildly around, I saw the sign, "Continental Boat Train." That would be safety, that was what I needed.

Like a mad thing, I began to run, past the barrier, up the platform and into the train for Dieppe. As I got in, it started. I caught a hasty glimpse of an amazed official.

Breathless, choking, I crouched in the corner. My head was whirling, I felt as if I were going mad. Phrases in my Mother's voice kept floating through my brain—"incapable of deception, honest and truthful"—yes, I must get away.

A collector awoke me to momentary reality—looking into my purse I found I had money to pay for the trip and remembered it was pay-day. Not till I was on the boat and the cool Channel breeze fanned my head did I begin to think. Then the blackness of loneliness enfolded me. I had run away from him. He would never forgive me. He too would be suffering as I was suffering, he might even think something had happened to me—why had I left him? The pain bit into my heart, stifled me, and in agony I hit my head again and again against the iron stanchion on

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which I was leaning. Gradually my worn-out nerves seemed to become dull, bringing a state of stupor.

To this day I have no recollection of what Dieppe looked like in the early morning light. I suppose I acted rationally, force of habit might make that possible. I wandered round the narrow crooked streets, and rested in a peaceful square surrounded by quaint old houses. In this dull, heavy mood I could not think, I was only conscious of an utter misery. The day passed and I had done nothing. As darkness came on, weariness drove me to the thought that I must find a bed. I bought a few things, put them into a bag and went to a quiet-looking hotel. I suppose I slept the sleep of exhaustion for I remembered nothing more until a bright ray of sun awoke me in the morning.

My brain was clear—that meant more intense suffering, but I was able to review things. The office, what would Moore think of me? Strange that although that thought had floated through my mind yesterday, it had seemed utterly unimportant. Now I began to realise that I had lost a good position, and more than this that I had behaved badly. I sent a wire to Moore that I would be at the office during the following day and would explain when I got there. I could not help smiling bitterly, as I thought how utterly puzzled he would be to get a wire from this little French place.

I should have to write to him, but I could not do [228]

that yet, I would have to be calmer, more sure of myself.

As I drew near to London, the interview with Moore began to assume terrific proportions. I could not possibly explain to him, unless I said I had lost my reason. And he would think that I had failed him. I went into his office feeling self-conscious and ashamed. I saw his keen eyes rest on me for a moment, then in his usual voice, he said,

"Oh, good day, Miss Marchand, just sit down for one moment while I sign this letter."

Excuses flooded my brain but all seemed stupid and inadequate.

"Now!"

"Mr. Moore," I began with halting voice, "I can only tell you that I had to go to Dieppe unexpectedly. I can't explain what must seem to you like failing. I am awfully sorry, but of course I know you would feel that you would not be able to depend on me after this."

I could feel his eyes searching me. I had looked at myself that morning to see what traces might be on my face, but except that my eyes were tired and hard, a casual observer would have seen little difference in my healthy colour.

Suddenly he turned to me. "Miss Marchand, I'll tell you frankly that I was disappointed. Until I got your wire, I thought you were ill, and wondered why you did not send any word. You know you might

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have put up a bluff that you were ill." A little smile touched his heavy face.

"That would not have been true," I answered quietly.

"I see, you believe in the truth—all right!" his hand went up to ward off my earnest assertion. "All right, I know you do. Though you may not have known it I have been watching you carefully these six months, and Croft has done the same for me. He's given me a very good report of you. In fact I had thought of asking you whether you wanted to go to New York for us."

"To New York!" I gasped.

"Yes, I think you'll make a good saleswoman after some months' training out there and I want to send some one who knows this market, who can interpret English conditions to the New York office, so to speak. They are apt to be a little impatient with us, at times."

"I am sorry, but I couldn't help it and I can't explain. When do you want me to leave?" I was too proud to ask for mercy. His head on his hand, he apparently gazed with all his mind at an ink bottle on his desk. Suddenly he looked up, leaned forward and said,

"How soon could you go to New York?"

"You mean you-that I-"

"I mean that I am going to give you a chance at that job if you want it."

"But I can't understand," I stammered, "it's—generous of you."

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"No," he snapped, "it's not generosity, it's hard-headedness. I know you can do that job better than any one else I have at present. I am always willing to back my opinion against all odds. I believe you had a good reason, an unusual reason for your absence, and I'm going to leave it at that. See that you do the work well, that's all. When can you go?"

I was bewildered at the suddenness of the thing. I had been prepared to look for something else, now this big advance was thrust upon me. It would be a solution of many difficulties, yet my heart frantically urged me to decline, not to leave England.

"Next week," I answered quietly.

"That's too soon," he smiled. "Let's see," he looked at the calendar on his desk and thought for a moment, "We'll make it the twenty-fourth, shall we?"

"All right. Thank you, Mr. Moore. I think you will be glad you trusted me."

I went out from his office with the date looming in big letters before my eyes. The twenty-fourth—in three weeks I should be sailing for another country. At the thought of what I was leaving behind, the tears gathered in my eyes. It would mean a definite parting from the man I loved, and I suppose half-unconsciously I had harboured a little hope that some day I would see him again. Now this seemed final. It would be the safer way—if I were in New York, there would be no possibility of a stray meeting, but how bitterly I resented the safe way. Yet common sense told me that it would be easier in the end over

which I was leaning. Gradually my worn-out nerves seemed to become dull, bringing a state of stupor.

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Still more surprised was I at Aunt Jane's attitude—she was almost tearful at the prospect of my leaving and I concluded that deep down in her heart she had a spark of affection for me.

"You see, Aunt Jane, I am on the way to that high pinnacle of success I used to brag about. When I am 'established' in New York, you'll have to bring Margaret to see me."

"Never!" she said, "you don't catch me crossing the ocean, I prefer the dry land. But perhaps Margaret will visit you—when she's married," she added slyly.

The colour flooded Margaret's face. "Why, I haven't heard a word of marriage, little Margaret," I said.

"No, no," she answered hurriedly, "there's nothing settled, it's just Mother's thought, I'm afraid," she added rather sadly.

"But who is it?"

"Oh, I know Bertie Wilfred will marry her some day," said Aunt Jane pompously, "you ought to see how regularly he writes to her!"

Bertie Wilfred! With a start I remembered that since that last struggle I had never given him a single thought. He was still in India, and I must write and tell him that I was going away—then I stopped myself, angrily, would I never learn to think first instead of acting on the immediate impulse! He had written me once or twice, but he was writing to Margaret regularly, as Aunt Jane said. In time he would forget me, I would be far away, and then there would be Mar-

Great Temptation

garet with her sweet and gentle nature to make him happy. I would just fade out of his life like an unhappy dream.

"He'll come back, some day, Margaret," I whispered to her, "then how happy you'll be."

They stayed with me for the rest of the week, breaking the thought of what was coming. Then with their departure, my own came nearer. The days passed quickly,—Thursday, Friday came and went—and it was the last night in my own country.

In the morning my head ached and my eyes were nearly closed for I had been saying good-bye to him, suffering at the thought of this final break. I came down to breakfast, thinking how old and ugly I looked, when by the side of my plate I saw a letter. almost afraid to look, then I knew that it was his writing—thank God he had written! I went away again and in my room I read my precious letter. lightened my burden a little How he loved me! He, too, asked to be forgiven for coming to me, for tempting me, but he had thought about it so much that everything was dulled except the need for me.—"When I could not find you, I was crazy, hunting for you like a madman, thinking that you must be there, though in the bottom of my mind was always the fear that you would not agree. When I could not find you, I almost hated you. I have been too resentful to write, too hurt by the thought that you could not love me. It is only within the last few hours that better feeling's have triumphed, that I know you only left me because

you loved me so much. Now I am almost glad that you went—almost. But the struggle has made me very tired—I feel terribly old and weary. Life seems to offer nothing worth living for—except the boy. I will do my best for him, for the sake of your love."

Old and weary, oh, my beloved—so we both feel like that though I am only twenty-three. What a long time still to live! What was it Bertie once said—"all the difference between eighteen and twenty-three, as you will find——" Difference! There seems to be years, ages, centuries. How world-worn I felt as I got on to the steamer that Saturday morning in June, carrying a huge bouquet of roses which the girls in the office had given me and which one of them laughingly said made me look like a bride!

As I stood on the deck and watched the receding coast line of my country, I knew a sense of intolerable aching desolation and loneliness—though in the little crowd who had seen me off there was no one of those I loved, yet their faces had been familiar, I was attached to them by acts of kindness, or by the common necessities of daily life. Around me were strangers—where I was going would be more strangers, nothing of the old ties which bind the heart to the country of childhood and growth, which never seems so strong as when Fate suddenly catches us up and bids us journey to another land.

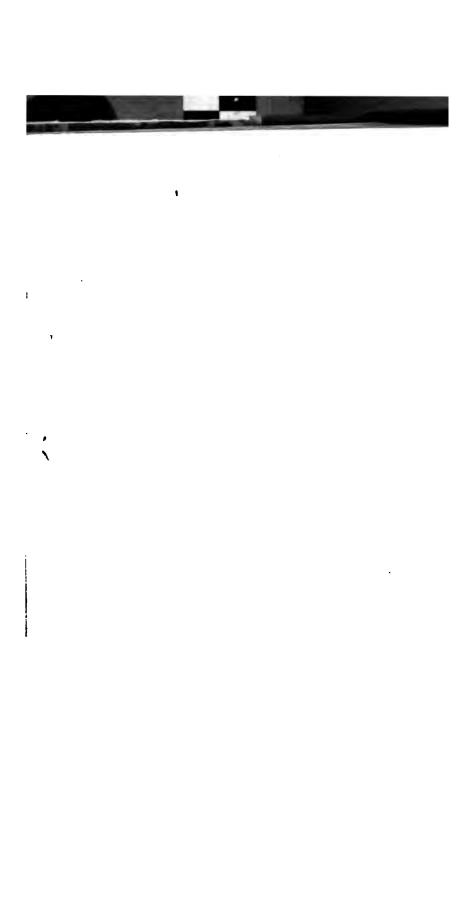
"Like a bride," I thought bitterly, and in a spasm of bitter rage against Fate which was setting me [236]

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adrift, I threw the flowers from me, hating their association with happiness and love.

But even before they touched the water, I wished them in my hands again. What kindly thought had provided them, what hard-earned salaries had gone to buy the lovely gift of farewell! As in a minute they were out of sight, I knew again that miserable remorse which I had felt when I had spoiled the loving work of my Mother's hands, that useless longing for the recall of moments that had gone, so that with new and more gracious action I could undo the effect of my hasty impulse.

As I looked out over the expanse of waters which was all too soon separating me from the place I loved, I wished intensely that I were all good or all bad, so that the ever-present conflict should be over and I should be at peace.



BOOK FIVE: AFTER MANY YEARS



BOOK FIVE: AFTER MANY YEARS

Chapter One

FOR the first three days of the trip, I was too ill to suffer even at the thought of leaving England and all that I loved. Nothing mattered so long as I could keep my aching head on the hard pillow, and find a more or less comfortable position for my long legs in the narrow berth. My mind was a blank, my physical sufferings took all my pity; half the time I just lay in a sort of stupor, awakened now and then by the sleek stewardess, "Sure there is nothing I can get for you?" How I hated that woman with her pink cheeks and fat voice which seemed to gloat over my discomfort!

The fourth morning I was surprised to find that I could contemplate the idea of eating without a shudder. Risking the effort of a cold tub, I felt at once invigorated, alive—and hungry!

"I should have some breakfast on deck," said the voice, "don't go down into the saloon."

With weak and wobbling knees I made my way up the perilous flight of stairs. The sun was shining, the sea rushing past in a smooth green mass, looking

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entirely harmless and undisturbed. Had it been as smooth as this all the time? If so, I might indeed feel ashamed of my sailing powers.

The air, the sun, and the food which for the first time tasted like something else than chips of wood, invigorated me, and I began to feel alive again. At once my mind flew back to its sorrow, but I strove with all my might not to think of what had been, but of the new life, and what was going to be.

I was lying in a deck chair, soothed by sea and air, feeling lazy and comfortable, undesirous of any exertion, when a voice floated to me from the bow. Surely it was familiar! I looked around and saw a very smartly dressed girl, talking to a man with grey hair, who seemed a good deal older. She turned and came towards me and I recognised Bessie Wilfred! She looked intensely surprised to see me, stopped, hesitated for a moment, and then introduced me to her husband, Mr. Stott.

I dressed for dinner that evening with particular care. Mr. Moore had told me to get some special clothes on the firm's order, "for I want you to make a good impression on New York," he had said, smiling, "and appearance counts a whole lot more over there. Mr. Richards thinks that if a woman doesn't dress well, she can't sell clothes to other women—or men." So I had many pretty dresses, and picking out one in blue with those little master touches which show the artist's fingers, I watched for its effect on Bessie Stott. As after that quick casual glance which

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yet notes the merest trifle, I saw a perceptible fracture in the self-complacency with which she had greeted me, I thought triumphantly of that evening so long ago, and her scorn of the home-made dress I had been wearing. How different was my present calm feeling of equality.

"Are you staying long in New York?" she asked.
"Forever, as far as I know—I have a position there."

"We are going up to Canada; James has some business there, and then we are going to have a look at America." Her tone almost implied that America would be honoured, and I smiled to myself and wondered. Apparently the Stotts were wealthy, judging by the suite they occupied, to which Bessie quickly invited me, and the wonderful apparel she wore. I looked at her curiously—her rather hard though pretty face did not look any different for this experience of marriage. Did she love her husband? "She's just one of those women who would attach themselves to anything with a large bank roll!" I thought, and then quickly, "Betty, you're growing to be a cat!"

How true it was! This final sacrifice to what I knew to be right had been made in no happy unselfishness; sub-consciously I was still fighting against Fate, although I had told myself that the past was over, that an entirely new future would have to be worked out in a fresh place. And thus inevitably there must have been a bitter tone in my laugh, a hardness in my eyes, a more haughty poise to my head—thus I came to the

new country almost as an unwilling captive, instead of an uninvited guest.

We steamed into New York Bay late one evening and there I was told we should have to stay till the following morning. But I did not mind, so beautiful and peaceful was the scene. With the stopping of the engines, the boat seemed curiously still; the silence was only broken by the sound of voices, or the occasional toot of a busy little tug, or ferry boat. eyes followed the expanse of water till it was lost in the darkness which was made beautiful by the twinkling lights. It seemed a respite before beginning the business of life again. Later I thought the peace less apparent, for surely every mosquito in the world must have cried aloud to its brothers and sisters—"Here is a new arrival, let us welcome her!" I had to retire to my cabin and shut the port in spite of the warm night.

At five o'clock next morning when sounds of unusual bustle awoke me, I looked out eagerly towards the outlines of Manhattan—what did they hold for me? Just then they were softly veiled in the pale grey of early morning, which made the irregular lines look like some fairy city struggling out of the mist. The scene was so soft and beautiful and peaceful that I hated the later confusion and busy-ness of the hard daylight.

It had been arranged that a girl from the New York office should meet me on the pier, under my baggage initial. In the hubbub and confusion, I looked

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around for one of the feminine sex who seemed as though she might be going to an office, but saw no one who tallied with my imaginary description. Presently, a pretty little brunette, daintily dressed in white, came forward and said,

"Excuse me, but are you Miss Marchand?"
"Yes."

"I thought you might be"—showing dazzling white teeth in a friendly smile, "as you were alone. I'm Sadie Glover; this is Miss Hale, a friend of mine." Her companion, a tall, handsome blonde, welcomed me with another smile, colder than the other, but still quite friendly. From the corner of my eye I looked at their clothes, reflecting with a pleased vanity that they had certainly beautified themselves to come and meet me. A few moments later I gasped in astonishment as I learned that they were going on to their respective offices as soon as they had disposed of me. What wonder in the London office would the appearance of these two radiant visions have aroused!

Under Sadie's sociability, I quickly thawed, and when we reached the hotel which they had chosen for me till I could decide where to settle, I said, "You must have some tea with me. I'm dying for a decent cup, for you can't get any that is fit to drink on the steamer."

I saw them glance at one another and laugh—"Tea—to-day. Why, you'll melt—ice-cream soda for mine."

"But tea makes you cool afterwards."

"We'll take your word for it, if you don't mind."

"All right," I said laughing. "I'll give up my tea for a minute and try your ice-cream soda, whatever it may be."

"You've never tasted it?" they chorussed in astonishment.

"Never in my life-do you eat or drink it?"

"You'll see," they smiled. And I did. Apparently the chief motive of ice-cream soda is to replenish the coffers of the vendor by creating a necessity for more—after two of them, I was more thirsty than before, and finally turned to tea to quench my increasing desire to drink. I suspect that my inside resented the presence of the hitherto unknown compound which preceded the tea, for there was a distinctly unusual feeling of unrest in that locality for several hours.

Next day I dressed very carefully for my interview with Mr. Richards, the New York manager, and started out with the happy feeling of elation which satisfactory clothes always give to a woman. It was, however, terribly hot,—the first sign of a heat wave, I was told, devoutly hoping it might be the last,—and by the time I had walked some distance along Fifth Avenue, my feelings had descended to zero, while my body had progressed up the opposite scale of the thermometer; when I finally reached the office, I felt positively dowdy after that stream of wonderful creatures clothed in all the colours of a rainbow. Perhaps it was this self-dissatisfaction which emphasised my loneliness—every one looked so concentrated, so

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indifferent, so cold. Was it possible that they felt emotion, pain, pleasure like I did? I could hardly think it was.

Mr. Richards was pleasant, but that same concentrated emotionless look of calm efficiency spoiled the effect of his manner, making me cold and nervous. I began to wonder if I should ever come up to his standard.

And in the next few weeks, as I worked immediately under his direction, I wondered still more. The office machinery seemed to work like clockwork—filing, typewriting, mailing, etc., all ran on oiled wheels, and a misplaced letter in the files, or a wrongly directed one in the mails, was almost unheard of. Mr. Richards decided that it would be a good plan for me to go right through the office system before coming to the selling game and afterwards I realised the value of this training, for I knew to the finest detail exactly how the whole business was worked.

I finally established myself in a boarding house in Gramercy Park which Sadie also inhabited. Lilian Hale was a New York girl, and on my first Sunday, Sadie and I were invited to her home for dinner—an apartment up-town which was almost as much a surprise to me as was her hospitality to a girl she did not know. It would have seemed natural to me that she should wait till she knew if she liked me before introducing me to her family. In the weeks that followed I was touched by the same continued hospitality of the two girls—they evidently desired that I should

not be lonely, that I should feel welcome, and they introduced me to their friends with a rapidity which pleased even as it bewildered me.

I liked my boarding house. After the heat and bustle of the day, it was delightful to see that square of greenery, delightful to rest the eyes upon it and recover from the weariness of incessant rows of buildings which in themselves seemed to advertise a strong, merciless efficiency, that would have no pity for failure. As block after block they stretched endlessly away into the distance, as tier after tier they raised their craning necks into the sky-a sky so blue and dazzling that it mocked all human efforts to shut out its lightthey impressed me with their new smooth perfection, but made me long for the straggling smoky outlines of London town, with their peaceful suggestion of age and dignity and comfort-where when the eyes are tired of stone and the works of man, they can fall gratefully on the green squares which ever break the lines.

Chapter Two

Y two new acquaintances were so unlike in disposition and appearance that their friendship offered a continual study in contrasts. Sadie's dainty little figure and sparkling charm of manner made Lilian's calm poise and big blonde beauty all the more marked and I suspected that the latter was as mercenary and selfish as Sadie was generous and lovable. Lilian's history was outlined to me after a two days' acquaintance, with the enthusiasm and admiration which coloured Sadie's warm interest in her.-"She's just a wonder! She started in here as a typist, gradually worked up to being Mr. Richards' secretary, emerged as a mighty fine saleswoman—then after a few years she said she thought buying would be more fun than selling and accordingly quitted and got a job in the women's suits department of a small store. And now she's head buyer of the same department at Gunnings—and she's only 32."

"Gunnings being?"

Sadie opened her eyes, then laughed musically. "One of the largest stores in ole New York—Gee, but I'll have to hurry your education! By the time I've finished there won't be a store in town that you don't know from A to Z."

She kept her promise—day after day in our lunch hour we explored these most wonderful stores—I marvelled at their size, their elegance, and their tastefullydressed windows which positively drew the money out of my pocket without a conscious expression of will.

It was perhaps Sadie's resemblance to my cousin Margaret which first drew me to her. She was more vivacious and more interesting because of her greater experience, but she had the same gentle and lovable personality. She earned a good salary as Mr. Richards' secretary, and this contented her, for she entirely lacked my own ambition to succeed; beyond the immediate present in which she was sufficiently happy, her thoughts turned to marriage. Her natural instincts were for a home life, boarding houses and apartments being only temporary and uncomfortable substitutes. "Perhaps it's because I'm a small town girl," she confided to me, "that New York seems too big and lonely. I want a cute little house with a vard, and neighbours who'd come and sit on the porch and gossip!" It seemed pathetic to me that she and her gentle little Mother who must have been of the same home-loving type should have drifted into this city of bustle and apartments and restaurants-that it should be she and not Lilian who was left alone by a mother's death-Lilian to whom life was bounded by visions of plenty of money, cabarets, restaurants, clothes and Fifth Avenue.

Sadie and I found another bond of interest in the memory of our dead mothers who had left to each [250]

of us so warm and loving a remembrance; our friendship grew daily and helped to keep me from becoming quite immersed in business interests.

For these were now my chief object in life. I had to stifle thought, I had to keep down that surging bitterness so that it did not make me desperate, and the only way was by entering with all my energy into the prospects before me. Sometimes as I was working with almost fierce concentration, memories of him would grow so clear that it seemed he was standing before me, the past more real than the actual present, and I would find myself trembling with a longing which drove me to the thought of throwing over everything and going home to him.

But my determination and energy were apparently successful for in three months, after some special training, Mr. Richards sent me to make my first attempt as a saleswoman in the United States. I set out with enthusiasm, convinced that I would win the good graces of the buyer and bring back an order, delighted to have an opportunity of showing this calm and efficient Mr. Richards what I could do.

The woman I interviewed was, I suppose, about forty, the buyer for a small store in a small town on the Jersey side. When I found that against her cold, calm acceptance of facts my arguments dashed as a babbling brook on a mighty dam, I tried a winning smile, persuasions, flattery. But I could not thaw her; "She was more interested in the line which C—— were showing. In any case, she was not buying

at present"—that was all there was to it. I came back with the feeling that I had shrunk considerably and faced my report of failure to Mr. Richards with a good deal of reluctance. But he smiled as I described the interview——

"She is rather a hard nut to crack. I thought it would be good practice for you, and failure at the start is not always a bad thing—for some people!"

It was not for me, it made me take more pains to prepare my case, to forestall objections, it deepened my determination that I would not be beaten.

And in another two months, after some local and not very important attempts, which met with varying results, I was given my first out-of-town deal which I understood was the largest I had yet tried and which was to result in my definite working of the territory—if I succeeded!

Keyed up to do great deeds and bubbling over with delight, I said to Sadie and Lilian as we three were lunching together,

"Now you'll see! I'm going to Pinbury to-morrow to get some orders."

A look passed between them—"Pinbury—who're you going to see?"

"A certain gentleman of the name of Holmes."

"Thought as much!" they chorussed. "Well, you're in for it!"

"How do you mean?"

They glanced around and Sadie whispered, "Don't [252]

tell Richards I said anything, but it's only fair to warn you. Holmes is a—a—well, a chaser."

"A what!" I asked in amazement.

"Gee, isn't it awful when you don't speak the same language!" giggled Sadie. "You're not on, are you?"

"I haven't an idea whether I'm on or off—in fact you're getting me deeper in at every step. But what about Holmes?"

"He's a little rat," she said viciously. "Lilian had that trip and she had to leave it—for good. Now do you understand?"

"I think I do," I answered seriously, "but I'm not afraid of Mr. Holmes or any one else."

"See how she tosses her head," laughed Sadie, "and retires to her top floor."

"What do you mean?"

"When you look haughty and dignified like that, we always say 'Betty's gone to her top floor.' How do you do that Duchess stunt?"

For a moment I looked at them coldly, then the laughter in their eyes overcame my sense of dignity—as we went into the cloak room I stooped quickly and caught Sadie's little body in my arms, jumping her up and down.

"Now will you make fun of me?" I said as I dumped her on a seat to the amazement of the attendant.

"Gee, ain't she the strong Duchess! I'll be just' scared to death of you now."

With their warning in mind, I set out for my trip.
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in fighting spirit. When I was shown in to Mr. Holmes' office, instinctively I disliked his smile. That he was not one of the clean, competent American-type business men I had hitherto met was evident all over his handsome effeminate face. The nation which had given him to the world did not make a loss when he departed from her shores.

I talked in a keen business-like way for a few moments and then he abruptly pulled out his watch and said,

"I'm awfully rushed to-day, couldn't we make a date to-morrow?"

As Richards had made this appointment for me, I felt considerably huffed, but it seemed wiser to humour him. "I wanted to get back to-morrow, couldn't you possibly fit in another interview to-day, Mr. Holmes?"

"Well, I could, but it would have to be later, after six o'clock."

"All right, what time?"

"Why shouldn't we talk over some dinner—unless you have an engagement?"

"I've no engagements," I answered abruptly. "I came here specially to talk business with you."

"Fine! Then let's make it seven o'clock at the Astor."

His would-be hearty, open manner seemed to fall flat. Yet, after all, there was nothing unusual in an evening appointment in the rush season, when a busy buyer had so many people to see.

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He seemed inclined to make a spread over the dinner. I refused a cocktail, wine—anything in the nature of "fluff." My manner was severely businesslike as I sensed that it would take all my tact to keep things on that level and yet take back an order. However, after a good deal of skirmishing, I finally got a fairly good deal all signed, sealed and settled.

He drank my share of the wine as well as his own, and every moment his smile grew more detestable. As soon as I could I said, "I must be going for my train. Thank you for the business."

"Oh, that's nothing, if they'll send you again, I'll give you heaps more. I like a good-looking woman."

I had only to smile, nod and get out—and instead I did a childish thing, I lost my temper—"Mr. Holmes, to you I'm just a seller, see!" I said icily, but emphatically.

An ugly look came into his eyes. "That's like you women," he sneered, "you let a man take you out and buy you dinners, and then you resent a—a compliment."

For a moment I saw red. Then making a strong effort, I said as calmly as I could—"You're quite mistaken. This is my firm's dinner." I beckoned the waiter. "Bring me the bill, please."

Mr. Holmes' jaw dropped and then sheepishly he began to protest.

But I was too furious to think of the consequences, "It will look better if you don't make a fuss," I said quietly. "I intend to pay."

His eyes gleamed with rage. "All right, then you tell Richards never to send you again, or he won't get a dollar's worth of business out of me."

On my way home, and as my anger cooled, I began to realise that I had "muffed" my first big deal. Next morning as I showed the order to Richards, he said smiling,

"That's fine. Have any difficulty to get it?"

"Not a great deal—but—I may as well tell you there won't be any more orders there for me." I told him briefly what had happened. When I had finished, he did not look so annoyed as I had expected, and after a moment's silence, he said,

"We've had trouble there before. I wanted to see how you would manage. You see you are new to the business and it was in the nature of a—a test."

"In which I have failed."

"No, not at all," he smiled. "We like to know that our saleswomen, though attractive, are—shall we say—adamant. See? You got further than some, as you did get an order before the party started!"

"I see," I said thoughtfully, though inwardly hating the suspicion of that word "test."

"We want business and business methods," he snapped—"no fooling! It's awkward though. I shall have to take Mason off the Southern territory and send him up to Pinbury next time, as Mr. Holmes seems to find my saleswomen too charming."

I thought a minute. "Mr. Richards, don't do that," [256]

I said eagerly. "I hate to be beaten, let me go again—that is if you will risk the possible loss of business."

"I'll do it," he said after a few minutes. "I like a fighter."

Three months later I made another visit to Mr. Holmes. I sent up one of the firm's plain cards, as I knew that if my name were in the corner, he would be "out," with a vengeance! I hoped my outward appearance was no index to my inward feelings as I walked into his room and with my best and frankest manner said "Good morning!"

For a moment he was astonished and then that ugly look began to creep into his eyes. "I thought I told you I wouldn't see you——"

"Mr. Holmes, I want you to be good enough to listen to me for just two minutes," I interrupted, earnestly. "I know you are too fair to wish to hurt my business career. If you continue to refuse to see me, it will mean that I shall lose this territory. That will be a serious loss. I am very keen to be a success and you, I know, can appreciate my desire to succeed. I feel sure you won't want to be the means whereby I fail."

He looked a little mollified. With some relief I knew that I had not been mistaken in thinking that vanity was his strongest point and because that had been hurt in our first encounter I had tried to soothe it. His voice, however, was still sulky as he said,

"I'm sure I don't want to spoil your career, but I

don't see why you made such a fuss about a—a compliment."

"I can't help it, Mr. Holmes, I have the greatest antipathy to compliments. I am terribly business-like, you know." I smiled what I hoped was a frank, engaging smile and then, not giving him time to reply, I went into details of the line of goods I was offering.

I put my whole brain, heart, nerves, personality—everything into my arguments. Presently he began to listen with interest, and finally his keen, business-like instincts came to the rescue and I was rewarded by a good order and an entire change of manner on his part—a change which remained permanent through all the subsequent transactions we did together, and which confirmed my opinion that it was vanity rather than viciousness which made him seek continuous proof of his irresistible fascination.

When I left him I felt exhausted—the strain had used up all my energy and in the train going home, I actually cried a little. However I was well repaid by the sense of triumph and the congratulations of Mr. Richards and Sadie. Lilian looked at me rather curiously before she said, "You're real clever, Betty!"

I can smile now as I look back on that first year's work. I suppose unconsciously at first I had the feeling that I was an alien in a strange land and it took me some time to understand that although we might use different shibboleths, fundamentally we had the same ideas and ideals. Sadie helped me to this realisation. In our frequent conversations about our old homes, I

began to know that the barrier which had seemed to stand between me and this foreign country was largely artificial and of the imagination—that life in that little Western town in Montana was very like life in Little Torbey—that Sadie and I could compare notes on our girlish habits and ideals with perfect understanding. This realisation of unity helped me greatly in my work and I was delighted when Richards said to me,

"I am very satisfied with Mr. Moore's choice. At first I was inclined to doubt the wisdom of sending an Englishwoman to work among Americans, believing that a native would do better, as she would understand conditions. However, time has proved that the experiment has worked very well and——" his eyes twinkled—"I feel sure the London office now considers us models of patience." For, from my previous knowledge, I had often been able to smooth away apparent lack of speed and interest on the part of the home office.

But in spite of some success, that first year held many lonely hours, black days when everything went wrong, and failure to obtain a sale sent me further down to the depths of depression. The cold grim fight to wrest a successful career out of the work I had undertaken often made me weary—the struggle with a hard and unsympathetic buyer left me craving for appreciation and sympathy and love. After one such particularly black day, I was sitting in my little room, too heart-sore to listen to the chatter in the library, and looking out through the darkness to the twinkling

lights of the Park, when the realisation of difficulties and loneliness and longing overwhelmed me, crushing my determination not to give way, shaking my body with hard tearing sobs. . . . "Oh, my little Mother, why did you leave me! Why couldn't I have taken the easier way of marriage?—there would have been wealth, comfort, companionship, probably contentment; happiness is too much to ask from Life. Why must I always fight and struggle alone? Is an ideal worth it? Nettie said 'No.' I am wondering if she were not right!" Slowly out of the darkness grew a vision of my Mother, till it seemed as if I could almost see her blue eyes and beautiful smile of love, and hear that voice which had thrilled me as a child-"Oh, don't give up, little daughter. Ideals are always worth striving for; they are the means whereby we try to reach that ultimate beauty of living which is our instinctive goal, without which life would be a wearying monotony of endless toiling days. the ideal of faith which has supported men and women through torture and death. It is the ideal of love which sends men to die for their country-which bids a man stifle impulse and live in decency and honour, working for the happiness of wife and child-which makes a mother wash and sew and mend while she longs for music and colour and the glamour of another life, which makes her see even in the older. harder faces of her children traces of their former purity and innocence. It is the ideal of love which makes marriage without it dulling, spiritless, degrad-[260]

ing through the betrayal of a gift which is Divine. To some few an ideal brings happiness, to most of us pain and striving, but always leading to the appointed and. Those who debase this spark of goodness in our hearts, suffer—those who cherish it, even to the giving of their lives, are richer at the last."

I raised my head slowly from my arms, almost expecting to see my Mother standing there, so clearly did the words vibrate in my ears. Perhaps I had been asleep and in that unconscious world of dreams her love had found a way to reach me, bringing me comfort. For some of the burden seemed to be raised—an idea began to glimmer in the darkness. Because I could not pour out my love on the being who had created it, I had kept it wrapped up darkly in my heart, feeling it useless and wasted. But supposing I allowed the influence of it to spread so that every one with whom I came in contact was the happier for it, out of the darkness and suffering, peace and contentment might come. I would try and take an interest in other people's lives, opening my heart to their influence, feeling sympathy with the sorrowful and joy with those who were happy.

Perhaps this new resolution did work a change in my manners, for Sadie said a few weeks later,

"I am glad you came over here, Betty. I was often lonely, though I do have a good time. And just lately I have felt almost as if you loved me, as if I had found my little Mother again, you have been such a dear to me."

And though I answered lightly, "Why, no one could help loving you," I put my arm round her shoulders and glowed inwardly at the thought of the beauty of the life I saw before me—when the rebellion and resentment I had felt against Fate would be thawed by the warmth of the new feeling. I think I saw myself a Ministering Angel. And so once again I set out on that difficult path of renunciation and selflessness, forgetting that my temperament made it certain that there would be the old fits of bitterness, that it would ever be a fight and never a settled victory.

Chapter Three

WAS surprised to find how much difference my own new attitude made in that of my business associates. Sadie had often told me that Mr. Richards kept a kind heart tucked away under his efficient and emotionless office manners,—how when her Mother died, his wife had taken her to their flat, and looked after her through the breakdown which followed—but I had always retorted,

"Seeing's believing! Till Mr. Richards proves to me that he is something more than a piece of mechanism with works responding only to the key marked 'Business,' I'll continue to think of him in that way. And as for Mrs. Richards, well, since I've never had the pleasure of seeing her, I'll have to take your word for it!"

And Sadie, looking puzzled, had answered, "I can't understand why she hasn't asked you to their flat—she takes so much interest in 'Mr. Richards' girls' as she calls us."

"Perhaps because I'm a foreigner," I had retorted with the suspicion of a sneer.

But now I was beginning to understand. Under a gay vivacity of manner that hard resentment had made a barrier of reserve which only the gentle Sadie

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had been able to penetrate. Mr. Richards and the other girls probably thought me cold and proud, when all the time I was aching with loneliness and the desire for affection. With the lowering of the barrier due to my new resolve, I found a more human Mr. Richards and a very charming wife to whom I was introduced one day in the office and who gave me a hearty invitation to dinner.

And in his home I saw a yet more human side to this man I had thought so repellent—a side which was very much under the control of a small piece of femininity—his young daughter, a pert baby of five who highly amused me by the way she "bossed" her father.

"Mr. Richards," I smiled, "how is it that you have not been able to inspire this little woman with any of the awe and terror which makes all of us tremble under your eye?"

His jolly laugh was very infectious. "She follows her Mother's example, I suppose!" and as I caught a glimpse of Mrs. Richards' twinkling eyes, I thought that she certainly looked very capable of controlling many destinies. It surprised me to find that in spite of his ample salary, they lived in such a simple way, their only help being a coloured girl. I was still further surprised to learn the cost of this simple way of living, and of the flat they occupied in the Fifties. It was pretty and well-planned, but the rent would have kept up quite a respectable mansion in Linesmoor!

Soon after dinner a younger brother of Mrs. [264]

Richards came in and turning to greet him I was instantly reminded of Bertie Wilfred. Already envious of this jolly home life in which I had no permanent part, a desperate longing for home shook me, for the scenes and faces with which I had grown up. I imagine the young man, who was called Tom Collins, must have been considerably astonished by the solemnity of my gaze, for I could not force a smile to my quivering lips.

And then just as my heart was softened by this glimpse of home life and by my new resolve, just when I was most likely to think of every one in my old life with keenest affection, I heard from Bertie Wilfred. "I've been home from India just a month," he wrote, "and I don't know whether it's the result of the climate or too much work—don't laugh, it's true—but I haven't been too fit. I'm thinking of taking a real holiday. Suppose I come over to New York—will you be at home and show me round?"

At first impulse I sat down to write—"Delighted!"—how welcome would an old friend be. Then I hesitated. Was it because, liking him so much, I feared that I might be tempted to give up and marry him? Or was it because I thought of Margaret—in time he would forget me, and she might be happy? I like to think that the latter thought was the one which strengthened my resolution, making me hastily arrange my vacation so that I could tell Bertie I should be away. But many times in the weeks that followed when a selfish determination to get some happiness out

of life triumphed, I was tempted to tell him that I had changed my plans, that he might come.

Meantime the happy home life of the Richards made me more than ever dissatisfied with a boarding house. Such had been my dwelling place for nearly four years and I could predict with more than a fair certainty of success just the meal I was going to eat, the conversation with which it would be garnished, the people who would furnish this conversation—and after a more than usually stupid dinner at which Sadie and I had been faced by two old ladies who were seeing New York for the first time and quite evidently did not approve of it or us, I said petulantly, as we went upstairs,

"This way of living is the limit—I'm just about tired of it."

"So am I-but what can we do?"

"Why shouldn't we take a small apartment together, furnish it very simply and have a real home where we can invite our friends?"

Her eyes shone—"Wouldn't that be fine! Can we afford it?"

"I don't know," I answered recklessly, "but let's try it."

The idea delighting both of us, we spent our spare time during the next few weeks apartment hunting and finally found one to our taste on the top floor of a building East of Broadway. Thereafter we haunted every second-hand furniture shop we could find and by the help of a large quantity of soap and

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water and some chintz we finally had two pretty bedrooms and a joint living room. The rental was moderate due to the unfashionable locality, and joy of joys!—there was a fire-place, or rather a place where gas-logs reposed and which in spite of their artificiality looked more cheerful than a radiator. By dividing the work and housekeeping we found the place a delight without too much extra trouble.

We established a habit of being at home on Sunday afternoons and gradually our small room was filled by a gay crowd in which Lilian was conspicuous with her latest beau; while the jolly laughs of Mr. and Mrs. Richards often resounded from the depths of our chintz-covered chairs, and Tom Collins, who was commonly accredited as my admirer, handed round the tea-cups. At last I had a home and the knowledge made me happier and less lonely.

Chapter Four

CO time passed and I was twenty-nine!—wondering that Lilian who was so much older than I could still find pleasure in a nightly canvass of the lights of Broadway, in the flutter of admiration from a neverending stream of cavaliers, each one dropping out of the boat as their purses or their interest failed. she never feel the need for something staple, for some emotion deep and lasting instead of this ceaseless flutter of excitement? Did she never look at her face and wonder what would happen when the wrinkles came and the youth that was passing had gone? Sometimes Sadie and I and "our friends" joined her parties, making an apparently gay and careless six, but perhaps of all of us Sadie's laughing vivacity was the only real lighthearted gaiety. For I had begun to realise that the "seeing of Life" which had seemed so wonderful was inclined to be garish and monotonous when stripped of that misty veil of Romance and the Unknown, and my zest for parties had grown a little stale. As I drank the drinks I did not like, as I received the attentions which only appealed to my vanity, as I danced in the crowded, heated, gaudy rooms, I realised that the streak of hard commonsense kept me from feeling the glamour of senses [268]

which alone could give the name of pleasure to this whirling mass. Sometimes I went alone to the theatre, looking back regretfully on that time when it had been so real that walls and people had faded and I lived in the life and emotions of the figures on the stage. Now, alas, they were just actors, good or bad, touching my heart by the thought that they too were in this struggle of earning a living, of making a career. Instead of the radiant and romantic beings whose wonderful life I had so envied, they were now just human beings, clever or pathetic, exciting my sympathy for their efforts even when the results left something to be desired. Twenty-nine, I thought, almost in fear of the many years to come-would content ever come to make up for the loss of that excitement, that glorious possibility of adventure which had so coloured my youth?

I am afraid that the Ministering Angel idea had imperceptibly faded in the fight for attainment. Except for Sadie there was no love, no softening influence in my life, and as I became more and more immersed in business details it seemed as though my capacity for keen emotion had gone. Even the first acute longing for the man I loved had become numbed to a dull dissatisfaction, and I had lost much of that vital sensation of my Mother's presence. I knew nothing deeper than the elation of pulling off a big deal, a feeling which naturally deadened the sympathy I might have felt for rivals in the game.

In outward circumstances, each year had been very [269]

like the last, except that my salary had changed for the better, as, I hope, had my salesmanship. Only three things stand out conspicuously in my memory of the general tranquillity,—the death of Mr. Edwards, Margaret's engagement, and Sadie's marriage.

Margaret had written to me regularly, long loving letters, full of the little homely details of her life—she had been staying with Bessie Stott, who was established in a splendid house near Hyde Park, and Bertie had been very nice to them; he was making a reputation as a lawyer;—she had seen Kitty Hovey, did I know that she had two children, and was growing fat! Then just as I had completed a second year in New York, came the news of Mr. Edwards' death—"I saw this in the paper and remembering how often you used to speak of your old Chief, thought you would like to have it."

"This" was a long and ornamental account of his virtues as a citizen and husband and father—as I read the description of the funeral and the rather obvious insistence on the sorrow of his wife, the past came before me vividly—the stylish pretty Mrs. Edwards, that voice on the telephone, our conversation in London—... "You were good to me, that will be a white cross in your record." . . . "I shall need it, there are many black ones!" Now it was over. It was impossible to connect eternal stillness with that impulsive jolly personality. In the midst of my sorrow I clung to the thought of his kindness and of our unspoiled friendship. Perhaps he, too, was glad that he had

that unsullied memory to take with him across the borderline.

Six months later came the letter which told me that Margaret was engaged to Bertie Wilfred and was going to be married at Christmas! I burst out laughing and immediately was glad there was none to hear me, for it had an ugly sound,—"So much for man's devotion—they are all the same! It took William just about a year to forget me—Bertie has made quite a record!"—and on that came the further thought which stung my pride, reaching and mocking my heart—"And you think that he has remembered? Why should he be different?"

But soon my old affection for Margaret triumphed over the cynicism—I was a poor creature; I made a decision which I knew to be right and then I could not do the brave thing and abide by it. For I had to admit that there was a good deal of hurt vanity in my reception of the news, that I hated to give Bertie up to some one else as a husband, even though I only wanted him as a friend. Contemptuous of my petty vanity, I wrote a warm impulsive letter to Margaret wishing her happiness.

Thus as the bond between me and those former friends of the old world became loosened by death and marriage, I clung all the more to my growing affection for Sadie. She was the one being who stood between me and the hardness of which I was afraid. I doubt if she ever knew how much I loved her, for natural reserve, intensified by a pride which feared

to show my deepest feelings, stood as a barrier against the display of those little gestures of affection which seemed so natural to her. In my love was something of the maternal desire to protect a weaker and gentler creature from the effect of this fight for a living which often seemed so cruel.

But a month before my twenty-ninth birthday I learned that even Sadie was leaving me. It was a snowy Saturday afternoon and we had ensconced ourselves snugly before the fire, chatting and munching candy when mail arrived. I opened one with the Linesmoor post-mark and waved it impulsively at her——

"What do you know about that—here's Nettie suggesting that she wants to come and see me. Her father's dead and she says she's sick of Linesmoor. Of course there's not room for her here, but perhaps we might manage—what can you suggest? I am so excited."

To my surprise Sadie's head bent still further over her embroidery, then she looked up and her cheeks were full of colour.

"I've been waiting to tell you, Betty, but didn't want to break up our happy arrangement—I'm going to marry Frank Rogers!"

"Frank Rogers!" I echoed. He was one of the boys who came to the flat and the one perhaps whom I liked least of any. She was going to leave me—a hurt jealousy of the new love made me say, "He's not good enough for you!"

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"I think so!" She raised her head proudly.

For a moment I sat rigidly while the fight went on between my selfishness which hated the intrusion of a third into the love between us, and that love which was glad of her happiness—then quickly I put my arms around her—"Of course you do. I'd never think any one good enough for you, I'm too fond of you not to be jealous. But I hope you'll be very happy, little Sadie."

"He wanted to get married soon but I could not make up my mind to leave you alone."

She had thought of me in her happiness—and silently I put my face against her hair—"Oh, Sadie, you are a dear, I wish I were more like you."

A few weeks later there was a pretty wedding in the Little Church Around the Corner, Sadie being the bride, and thus I was able to welcome Nettie to the flat which had seemed so lonely during the few days I was there alone.

I went to meet her in a burst of excitement, drinking in her vivid beauty, more daring than usual in the deep black, and adoring it as I used to in my childish days. Suffering had given depth to her eyes and softened the prettiness which had been inclined to hardness, till I did not wonder at the fervid goodbyes which echoed around her. But to me she was the old Nettie, and as we sat before our gas-logs, echoes of childhood filled our hearts.

She brought me news of Kitty who was immersed in motherly cares with a family of three, of William

who was growing staid and pompous in spite of his youth—of John who was still leading a gay and erratic life in Linesmoor—"He's the nicer of the two, though, Betty!" she said with a touch of that reckless smile.

"You've met him?"

"I had dinner with him and we talked of the old days. William would drive any brother to drink, he's too much of a model."

"But what does John do for a living?"

She shrugged her shoulders,—"Ask the Marines! But he's fascinating, all the same."

"And what are your plans?"

Again a shrug—"I don't know, old girl; I'll stay with you till you're tired of me and then—wander, perhaps!" Her attractive smile crinkled her eyes—"I've nearly been married again several times, but memory has still a trick of bringing up old visions and saying coldly, 'Don't be a fool!" Perhaps some day, though, I may be reckless and put old memory in a dungeon!"

I watched her in fascination as the lights and shades rippled over her face. It seemed so sad that she should not have won happiness with so much beauty.

She created a stir of excitement in our little crowd—on the first Sunday afternoon she seemed to fill the room, making every other dull and lifeless. Tom Collins was immediately swept off his feet—the other boys buzzed around her, even Lilian's beau finding that his eyes wandered in her direction. And I

smiled mockingly as I thought, "The newest, prettiest face, and then where is your cavalier!"

For several months Nettie stayed with me, bringing a gayer crowd to the little flat, providing elaborate suppers, surrounding me with little luxuries, creating an air of unrest and excitement which communicated itself to me. I began to long again for that vanishing vision of romance and possibility, to know that straining after adventure and the unknown, to think that immersion in business details was dull and stupefying, to find it difficult to set out in the morning after a late party. Under her influence my own longing for gaiety and comfort and the excitement which wealth can offer began to fill my horizon—I shrank from the vision of long years of business routine which stretched before me. "Youth is passing" was the refrain which beat in my ears.

And then—perhaps it was Fate's challenge to me—I met a man in whom seemed to lie the epitome of that excitement and unrest which was disturbing me, and who further had that dangerous and to me attractive attribute of a dominating personality.

Chapter Five

NE of my best customers was at the store of Curtis Brothers in Pinbury, though I dreaded each and every visit on account of my dislike of their buyer. To combat her cold keen buying ability every atom of my nervous energy and brains and wit had to be put into play, and after a long and tedious argument with her I felt like a limp piece of paper. But our line seemed to suit her and the orders I received were worth much effort.

I was just saying good-bye to her with the usual feeling that I had been wrung out and hung up to dry when a man of tall and commanding appearance came into the room, and instantly her aggressive, almost insolent attitude changed to one of charm and affability.

"Oh, Mr. Menton, this is Miss Marchand from Oldhams. We have just concluded a very satisfactory deal."

He smiled at me out of dark bold eyes and I bowed myself out. Stopping for a moment in an aisle to look at some gowns I heard a voice behind me say very softly, "I'm glad you are not in a hurry, for I want to talk to you for a few minutes. Won't you come to my office?"

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I turned round to meet the same dark eyes, a smile in their depths which held something bold yet secretive. Judging from the buyer's reception of Mr. Menton, he was a person of importance whom it might be wise to placate.

"With pleasure," I answered amiably.

He motioned me to a chair and after a moment, "So you are Miss Marchand, from Oldhams—New York house, of course."

"Yes," I said, wondering what was coming.

"That's all right. I went into Miss Robin's room to find out. I have seen you in our store before."

For a moment the daring admiration of his look held me silent. The smile deepened—there was some hidden quality in it which made me feel very young and stupid, melting my easy woman-of-the-world manner which I had thought impenetrable. In the effort to cover my confusion I asked quietly,

"Is that all you wanted to know?"

"Yes!" Then after a pause, "I shall be in New York next week, and shall be calling at Oldhams—I'll hope to see you."

I was beginning to recover my usual poise as I thought contemptuously—"one of the men who think a woman always falls for their first admiring glance."

"It's hardly likely," I answered coldly. "I'm usually out."

"That's a pity, but I shall still hope." He stood up as if the interview were over, holding the door for

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me. As I reached it, he added, "But I'm mighty lucky, you know."

I was about to pass out, haughtily, without remark when through his smile appeared a glint of will power, of a dominating determination; without my volition my fighting instinct leaped to meet it, that childish bravado which still lingered tingling through my veins, making me answer with subtle defiance,

"This time I think your luck will find a mighty tough proposition!"

So for a moment we stood, defying one another; then slowly the light of daring and admiration in his eyes set the torch to that fear that life held no longer the old possibility of adventure, that fear of a grey future—here was a signal "danger" and immediately I responded to the excitement of it, to the same thrill which had come to me when jumping from rock to rock far above the waters of that little fishing port.

Perhaps my almost unconscious acceptance of the gauge he had thrown showed in my eyes, for an answering light leaped to his.

"Good-bye!" I smiled lightly.

"Au revoir," he answered meaningly, and as I went out to feel a renewal of that old sense of tingling adventure, the echo of the refrain "Youth is passing" drowned an acknowledgment of how different was this hard and inwardly contemptuous acceptance of the possibility of excitement from that young romantic vision which was shadowed by the mist of ignorance.

Chapter Six

I N a week I had had dinner with him. Though his manner was charming and courteous, though I held the conversation to matters of business and travel and of trivial incidents, I was conscious of the daring of his deep secretive smile with its quick glint of determination, and the exhilaration which came to me from a sense of danger and struggle drowned my inner realisation that it was an ignoble one. And when he suggested a ride for Sunday, I retorted,

"Sorry I'm engaged," then politely, "But perhaps you would like to come up to our flat—we have an informal tea-party on Sunday afternoon."

I watched his eyes—saw the amused glint of the acknowledgment that we were fencing, then bowing, "I shall be delighted," he said.

I watched him again as he met Nettie, who in a filmy black looked more daring than if the colours had been flaming. Sadie was there, gently happy and smiling, and in a whisper she asked me, "Who's the newcomer?"

"My latest beau!" I answered scoffingly, "he's manager at Curtis Brothers."

"I don't like him," she said decidedly.

"I'm not quite sure that I do either!"

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Lilian had overheard our conversation—"Is that Mr. Menton of the Curtis Brothers at Pinbury?" she asked with wide open eyes.

"The very one," I laughed. "Why such awe?"

"Only that he gets ten thousand a year and old man Curtis who's in his dotage relies entirely on his judgment. They say he'll probably inherit as there are no relations and he's on the right side of the old man. You're quite lucky;" she looked at me curiously.

"Quite," I retorted lightly, "'Miss Who's-Who-on-Incomes!" But as she turned away Sadie said in a hurt voice,

"I do wish you and Lilian wouldn't talk like that, you know you don't mean it."

I watched the handsome figure of the tall blonde beauty as she walked away and joined the group of which Mr. Menton made the centre-piece,—"I'm not quite so sure!" I answered enigmatically.

And later when he came over to me, asking if I wouldn't join a party for dinner—he knew two men who'd be delighted to make a six, Nettie and Lilian having already agreed—I thought scornfully that Lilian had been improving the shining hour—or was it "the latest, prettiest face" of Nettie! When we were arranging details he said laughingly, "One of the men is the boss of the Centre films, so you girls want to watch your chances—maybe you'll be shining as movie stars and all thanks to me!"

In spite of inner scorn I'm afraid vanity set me deliberately to try and hold my own against Nettie's [280]

dashing beauty and Lilian's quiet but meaning glances; after the loud laughter of the others had greeted a rather daring remark, I found Mr. Menton looking at me. And as I met his eyes, into my own danced some of the excitement and danger which his presence brought. Under cover of the noise, he said quietly, "You are a puzzle!" As I raised my brows, I still smiled back at him with that touch of defiance and recklessness.

But later as I saw him watching Nettie's mobile face I said naturally and in impulsive tribute to her beauty, "No wonder you think her lovely!"

"She'll make a good movie star," he replied, and there was some intonation in his voice which made me ask indignantly,

"What do you mean?"

"Admitting that she is lovely, she is too obvious for my taste. I am more interested in wondering what goes on behind *your* eyes. They are too beautiful to be as cold as they appear."

There was a daring suggestion of intimacy in his dark searching glance—for a moment I met it with the same smile which hid and yet suggested. Then quite suddenly came a wave of repulsion for the man, for myself, for the place, for this deliberate seeking of excitement. As I felt it freezing the dancing exhilaration in my veins, I knew that my face grew quiet and hard, my eyes cold and repellent, for I could see the change in them reflected in his—in the gradual grow-

ing grimness of the lines about his mouth, of the fighting spirit it reflected.

And as I impetuously broke up the party, I hated myself with a dull weariness. Was it to this stupid and frivolous end that I had sacrificed the longing of my being in an endeavour to keep the beauty of that ideal love from being smirched!

But in the days that followed there was always the fear of a return to monotony which the excitement of fighting against the man's determination had broken—always the immediate response in me to the challenge of a dare—to make me go on with the game.

"Mr. Menton seems to have a good deal of business in New York just now," said Nettie, laughingly, a few weeks later.

"Any wonder when your pretty face is around?" I answered banteringly.

"Oh—ho, no, Miss Betty, you can't lay him at my door!" Then after a moment's pause, "But seriously, though, Betty, are you going to marry him?"

I looked at her in surprise—the thought of marriage had not entered into the game of excitement. "Good heavens, no!" I answered emphatically, "not that he has any intentions in that direction!"

She squatted down by my side before the fire and leaning her head against me said gently,

"I wish you were happy—you're too good to waste."

Her unusual show of affection softened me; we drifted into talk of our school days and the present [282]

life seemed happily far away. But it was vigorously present a few days later when at a party given by "Nettie's movie-man," as we called him, she broke the news to us.

"Congratulations, folks!"

For a moment my heart seemed to stop and then she had added, "I'm going into the movies. Mr. Ibsen has offered me a job in his company. So I shall be a screen star after all—in one short year—that's the agreement, isn't it, Jimmie?"

His fat but clever face broke into smiles—"We shall see, dear lady, we shall see!"

"Oh, Nettie, I wish you luck, but I shall miss you. First Sadie, then you—now I shall be quite alone."

Even as the words came from my lips I met Mr. Menton's eyes and in spite of myself the blood rushed to my cheeks.

"Nettie," I said to her that evening, "is this all right, is it a straight offer?"

She looked at me for a moment then throwing back her head she laughed in childish amusement—"Oh, you old romancer, I should say it is—you may trust me, dear child; I can assure you I can look after myself."

I smiled in relief—"I wish you luck, I promise faithfully to visit every picture."

When I had seen her off to the West, the flat looked lonely and deserted without the radiance of her presence. I wondered what I should do with my home. I did not relish the thought of staying there alone and

though I hated the idea of going back to a boarding house, where it was impossible to entertain in comfort, I realised that the little supper parties at which Nettie and I had presided would be difficult now that there was only one woman to act as hostess. But as I would not accept Menton's invitations to dinner without giving him some hospitality in return, I asked Lilian and Tom Collins to make a four at bridge.

Menton arrived at eight o'clock, filling the room with his vivid personality, making it seem cramped and full of a compression that might finally explode.

"How fine!" he smiled, "a party of two!"

"No, I'm expecting Lilian and Tom for bridge. I didn't want to bore you too much."

"You are thoughtful!" he mocked, "when do they come?"

"Any minute."

"Thank Heaven for even a brief respite." Then more seriously, "It's a treat to see you alone in your own home."

"Almost suggests woolly slippers and hot grog!" I refused to be serious, but as we talked and fenced, retreating and advancing, I watched the time with some anxiety, for Lilian was usually so punctual. At nine o'clock the 'phone rang and I heard her in an apologetic tone—

"I'm awfully sorry, Betty, but Tom and I came out to the Belmont for dinner, and his machine has broken down and there isn't a taxi to be had. I hope it won't bother you!"

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"Oh, not at all, Lilian," I answered casually to hide my anger, "we can go on to a cabaret. Hope you get home safely in the end."

"What's this about a cabaret?" said Mr. Menton. "Not on your life! I'm quite comfy here, thank you. I shan't die if the fair Lilian doesn't arrive."

"She's held up at the Belmont, she says. But we can't stay here and talk, we'd get bored to death."

"I shouldn't."

"You don't count," I answered lightly. "Where shall we go?"

"I refuse to budge."

"In that case I'll give you a drink and send you home."

But as I stood up, he was by my side, and grasping my shoulders, held me, facing him.

"You can't elude me forever," he said in a low voice. "I'm tired of puzzling over you, of trying to solve the problem of whether you are—"

"Good, bad, or indifferent," I broke in, looking at him quizzically. But my nerves were tense and when the telephone bell rang a second time, I could not control a start. "Now you see you'll still have to puzzle, I must see who is calling."

But he held me tightly. "They can wait, I've waited long enough." His eyes were searching mine. I was not conscious of fear only of that reckless sense of danger which was exhilarating.

I stared at him defiantly, then the absurdity of that insistent buzz-buzz made me laugh out in sheer amuse-

ment—"You can't possibly have your mind set at rest while that dickens of a row goes on. You'd better let me answer it."

He frowned impatiently but released my shoulders. "Hello!" I said gaily, "who's that?"

A hurried strained voice met my ears—"Hello, Betty, this is Frank Rogers. Sadie—can you come quickly, she wants you."

Sadie! In my restless straining after excitement I had given small interest to her warm happiness in the child she was expecting—often I had seen her soft eyes watching me with a hurt, puzzled look, but had recklessly steeled my heart to them. Now those three words, "she wants you," flooded me with remorse for my neglect during these weeks—perhaps she had been afraid, perhaps she had wanted me many times.

"Sadie—is everything all right?"

"No-there's danger. Oh, come quickly, won't you?"

"Yes," I managed to answer, then turned away blindly, the realisation of my deep affection for her tearing remorsefully at my heart—if only I could have had the past few weeks back again, if only I could still show her how I loved her! It was the same old useless refrain of opportunities lost, affection and love hidden, which makes such a sadness of human companionship.

"What is the matter?" The voice startled me, I had forgotten everything but the instantaneous need to try [286]

and make up to her. I stood, trying to steady myself, muttering,

"It's Sadie—she wants me—quickly." I walked to the door.

But there was a figure in front of me. I rubbed my hand over my eyes, for it seemed cloudy, dreamlike, as I still muttered,

"Sadie wants me-perhaps she's dying."

"I want you too—I won't let you go to her—unless you'll promise to come back to me. Will you?"

The words cleared away the mist. With a mind free from all glamour of excitement I looked at his strong figure, at the hand which was grasping my arm, at the dark eyes which were no longer secretive, and hatred and loathing swept over me till I was trembling and voiceless. And in my brain beat the thought—he is keeping me from Sadie—till with that old blind fury which I had thought gone forever, I wrenched my arm out of his grasp, stammering, "I'll never see you again!"

Perhaps the deep repulsion I felt cut through even the thick web of his vanity, for he stepped back, staring in amazement.

Pulling open the door, I began to run, never stopping till I reached Sadie's home, while all the time I strove to get away from that biting self-shame and remorse, praying wildly that she might not die, that I should yet have time to show her how I loved her.

A nurse met me—"Don't stay long," she said imperatively, "but she was getting so worked up about

seeing you that we had to humour her." I could not ask the question which was aching in my heart.

I found a wild-eyed woman, unrecognisable from the pretty gentle Sadie I had known, who grasped my hand as she said in a strained whisper, "Betty, I feel I'm not coming through. If anything happens to me, promise that you'll look after my baby."

"Of course, I will, dear, but you are nervous now, you'll be all right."

"But you promise, you promise?" she said desperately.

"I promise!" She turned away and a muttered "Oh, God!" came from her twisted lips. "Go away, go away!" she almost shrieked.

Chapter Seven

WENT back into the little drawing room where Frank Rogers was waiting with a set face which concealed his fear. Neither of us spoke, and outwardly as composed as he, I suffered in silence from agonising remorse and shame. And as I waited for what seemed like endless hours in the room so close to the mystery of birth and yet so far removed by my helplessness, a crushing sense of loneliness and uselessness overwhelmed me. Of what use my brains, my competence in suffering like this? I had attained success in my business career—what then? I was alone, trying to fill my emotional need by these passing admirations which only made me despise myself. What did such things count in the realities of life! If I died, no blank would be left in any one's life, hardly a tear would be shed-a few shakes of the heads of kindly friends, and then oblivion. accounted brilliant, successful-was I? My heart was starved at the expense of my brain—had that ideal of being true to my love, held even through passing clouds of recklessness, been maintained at too great a cost? Ought I to have married and perhaps in time overcome my shrinking from any other man than he? This was Life—this bond of husband, wife and child.

I had none of it, I was just a lonely woman, with middle age coming to me, unsurrounded by the love of family which makes even grey hair and wrinkles beautiful.

At last the nurse, with her face still and white, tame into the room. "Come at once, Mr. Rogers, she wants you."

I grasped her arm, "Is she all right?"

"She's dying," she whispered.

Oh, my poor pretty little Sadie! What a short time of happiness and then the end. Now I should never be able to show my love—the opportunity was gone forever.

Soon I heard a queer little cry, helpless and plaintive, and the nurse was putting a soft bundle into my arms.

"Do you mind holding the baby for a time?"

"Is Sadie---"

She nodded, with pain in her eyes.

As I held this new living atom of humanity, the baby for whom the Mother had just given her life, and looked at its queer small face, something hard in my heart seemed to break. Tears streamed down my cheeks, washing out resentment, and shame. I knew again that passionate childish pity for something small and helpless and weak; the memory of my love for the ugly little kitten brought the realisation that even there was the germ of this mother love which was now warming my cramped heart. I held the tiny body tightly to me, while my thoughts went back to [200]

him with the old emotion, and I felt again the sense of my Mother's nearness. So she must have once held me to her heart.

In the days which followed, as I spent every moment of my spare time with the baby, watching her sleeping, waking, in her bath, she grew to mean so much to me that I was almost afraid to mention a plan which gradually grew in my mind. Finally, summoning up courage, I said casually to Frank Rogers,

"What are you going to do about the baby?"

"I don't know. For the present I suppose I shall just keep the nurse here to look after it."

It! He called my baby "it." "I promised Sadie that I would look after her, and I want to keep my promise, but in that case I should prefer to adopt her legally so that I could bring her up in my own way. Of course you can come and see her," I added hastily.

He seemed frozen. "I don't know that I want to see it, I can't forget that it cost her life. But, Betty, that would be a great responsibility for you."

"It would be good for me, give me something besides myself to think about. And my salary is good and likely to grow. I can look after her properly."

The fact that the baby was a human being seemed to have dawned upon him, for in his answer he gave her sex instead of that indefinite "it"—"I know that Sadie would have preferred you to bring her up. Besides if she stayed with me she would only have paid labour to look after her. I'll agree if you'll let me settle a small annual sum upon her."

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"All right," I answered with unusual meekness. He did not want my baby—my heart sang! She would belong to me—I should have an object for which to work, was my happy thought. How many visions and plans for her future began to form!

With my usual impetuosity I gave myself up entirely to the new emotion. Arrangements were completed and the baby and a competent nurse were installed in my little apartment. I called the child Marian after my Mother. What a difference she made to me! She awakened the tenderness which had been cramped by disuse; the restless straining after the realisation of that old vision of life which should carry me to heights of wonderful emotion was assuaged by the warm vital love for a little child, and business was no longer the most important factor in my life.

Chapter Eight

I HAD heard nothing of Mr. Menton; he had faded out of my existence as I wished, and I thrust out of my thoughts even the memory of those weeks of which I was ashamed. But I was not to be so entirely exempt from consequences of my recklessness, for a month later Lilian danced into the flat, her quiet beauty glowing with unusual excitement.

"I've done it, Betty!" she said gaily, "I'm married."
Under the influence of the new tenderness my heart
went out to all the world, wishing them happiness,
"I am so glad, Lilian, which of the many is the one?"

"I guess you'll be surprised——" for a moment she seemed embarrassed, "It's an old beau of yours."

"Of mine?" I smiled, "I can guess, Tom Collins, he's been devoted to you for weeks."

There was defiance in her emphatic "No!"

Memory swept my mind—with quick fear, I stammered, "Lilian, you can't mean——"

"Yes, I do, I'm Mrs. Menton. You stuck so many pins into his vanity that I caught him on the rebound." With hard bright eyes she stood looking at me. "The deed has just been did, and I thought I'd run in and tell you while he made some arrangements. Well, don't you wish me joy?"

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"Indeed I do—but—Lilian, how could you do it, you know his reputation—you——"

"You bet I do, I never take steps in the dark, but I'll see that he toes the line all right."

"But you don't love him the merest atom—do you?"
"Oh, enough to make life tolerable—with the pros-

pects attached. Well, I must beat it,—good-bye, Betty."

"I am afraid it is good-bye. I can't meet him."

Her eyes narrowed as she looked at me quizzically, "I wonder what happened between you two?"

"Nothing," I retorted indignantly, "only I don't want to meet him again."

"Oh, all right," she answered lightly, "I'm sorry for I've always liked you, Betty, but it can't be helped. Wish you luck."

As the door closed on her splendid figure, the room seemed deserted and lifeless, leaving only a woman who felt old and sad and tired, who as she looked at the sleeping baby felt bitterly ashamed of her continual failures to live up to the ideal of nobility set by that long-quiet voice—failures which could not be suffered by her alone, but rebounded on all around.

Chapter Nine

THE crowd which had made our Sunday afternoons in the little flat so bright had now lost three of its gayest figures, and for many weeks I was a lone participant in the old function. But gradually as "Betty's baby" became a centre of attraction in my home, many of the old crowd again took up the habit of dropping in on Sunday afternoons, and after her airing, Miss Marian would be arrayed in her best frock and shown around to a circle of admirers. As the months crept on and she began to jump about in the nurse's arms, I said to Mrs. Richards, who was the chief sinner,

"Between all of you that baby will be so spoiled that the whole of my time will be taken in spanking it out of her!"

And her jolly laugh rippled out—"My dear Betty, when the first occasion looms into the foreground, do call me up and let me watch your face as you perform!" I joined in her laughter, for in spite of my words, I am afraid I could not claim exemption from the general attitude towards Marian.

Frank Rogers generally dropped in every week, but as it was nearly always in the evening, he seldom saw

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Marian awake—"You ought to come on Sunday afternoon, Frank, then she is at her best."

"Oh, I don't like being around with the crowd," he answered and thinking that it brought too vividly to mind old memories of Sadie, I sympathised and was silent.

"Do you know, Betty, you grow younger and prettier every day," he said one evening, as I had been recounting some of Marian's cleverness, "I used to be rather afraid of your haughty manner, now it has almost disappeared."

"That's the influence of my daughter," I laughed. "I can't grow old when she takes liberties with my hair and eyes and nose."

And I thought how the softening influence must be showing in my face and manners, for only that morning as I was bathing her, I had caught sight of myself in a mirror, and had stopped in astonishment—for a moment it had almost seemed as though my Mother's face had looked back at me.

So my thirty-second birthday came and went and Marian was two years old. We were celebrating the double event on the following Sunday afternoon, but Frank Rogers had begged to be excused and came in as he frequently did on the Saturday evening. I was gently chiding him for the extravagant doll he had sent to Marian, and, showing him the many presents which had been given to her, I added laughingly, "She's cutting me out entirely—no one even remembered my birthday!"

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He was all apologies for his omission, then gradually becoming silent, he looked thoughtfully into the fire.

"Penny for your thoughts!" I said lightly.

After a long pause he answered earnestly, "I was wishing that you would marry me, Betty."

I sat there stupidly, wondering if I were dreaming—could I have heard aright? "I don't understand—marry you—are you asking me because you want the child?" If this were his reason then I could understand and sympathise in spite of the hurt to my dignity.

But his denial was emphatic—"I should say not. It's you. How could I see you so often and not grow to love you—think of the times when I've seen you looking at the child with eyes that were shining and soft, so different from that keen way you have as a rule. You've changed so much to me, too, you've been so gentle and charming and kind."

"Because you were Marian's father"—though my voice was cold and cutting, inwardly I was taking myself to task. Should I never conquer that old habit of a blind acceptance of things as I saw them, instead of looking beneath for possibly dangerous currents! Then at the sight of his eager eyes, anger burned in my heart.

"How can you talk to me of love, when it's so soon after her death, after her giving her life for your child!"

"It's two years—and Sadie would understand, she loved you."

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"Two years!" I echoed bitterly. "Is that so long to a man, is no memory sacred? To me you are, and always will be Sadie's husband." That he should ask me, Sadie's friend, to marry him seemed like an insult to the girl I had loved—it sickened the woman who still clung to that old ideal of being true to love in spite even of death. My old dislike of him revived and I felt that I did not want to see him again. "It will be better if you don't come any more. If you want to see Marian sometimes, I'll——"

"No!" he interrupted sullenly, "it will be better for her if she does not know of my existence. I'll probably go away, I've the offer of a job in Mexico as superintendent of a mine. But the money will be all right."

My impulse was to say that I wouldn't take it, that I could look after Marian, but in the knowledge that the refusal would be unfair to her I acquiesced, determining only that not a cent of it should be touched, that it should accumulate for her later years. "Thank you," I answered quietly, "good-bye!"

When he had gone I stood beside the crib where she was sleeping. "Oh, God, is there no ideal woman for a man? Is almost any woman just the same as another—can't he be true to one through years of sadness and loneliness whether he has her or not? Has he forgotten my very existence?"

My sad pondering was interrupted by Tom Collins' voice on the telephone, and the liveliness of it which [298]

suggested that he had entirely recovered from Lilian's desertion, seemed to confirm my fear.

"Say, Betty, would you mind if I brought a friend along to-morrow? He's a countryman of yours and has only just come out and I guess he's lonely. He's studying engineering."

"Of course you may bring him along. Tell him he will be very welcome."

"You don't sound very keen-what's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing much—just a spell of 'sick and sorry'—but honour bright, I'll really be delighted to welcome your friend."

"All right——" then laughing—"Want me to come over and cheer you up right now?"

"For heavens' sake—no," I answered emphatically. Then I laughed too at the idea of his acting a Ministering Angel part.

And in the preparations for the party I forgot my sadness. There was a birthday cake for Marian with two candles and it was a happy crowd who gathered in my little room—a crowd whose tender memories of the dead mother found expression in a desire for the happiness of her child, who was petted and indulged with so many secret bits of candy that my thoughts inevitably turned to her next-day condition.

Just before tea-time Tom Collins came in with his gay "Hello, Betty, hope we're not too late. This is my friend Mr. Wilson."

I stood there staring at a ghost of the past—his eyes,

his face, less grim and stern but marvellously like him.

A pleasant boyish smile and a clear voice, "It was my fault we were late, I'm afraid, Miss Marchand. It was awfully nice of you to say I might come, too."

It was his son. Even the voice had a suggestion of that well-known tone which stirred my heart.

I made an effort, smiled rather woodenly and shook hands—"Oh, you're just in time to cut the cake," I said lightly in that voice with which we utter stupid nothings even when emotion is gripping the heart.

His son! Thankfulness flooded my heart—thank God! I could take his hand and look into his eyes and be his friend instead of what I might have been, his enemy! Oh, the happiness of the thought.

All through the afternoon I watched him, finding a trick of expression, a tone of voice, a gesture which vividly reminded me of the man I loved. When he saw Marian he stood looking at her with that awkward wooden manner with which a boy of 20 regards a very young child. But she had no doubts about the matter. Clasping a finger in her fat hand, and calling "Man, man" in her shrill treble, she took possession of him.

"Won't you come and have dinner with me some evening, Mr. Wilson?" I smiled as he was leaving, "you can imagine how eager I am to have first-hand news of home. What about Wednesday?"

"I'd like to, very much; any day will suit me, for I haven't many engagements," he answered, and in the [300]

thought of my own lonely past I determined to help him as much as I could.

I could hardly wait till Wednesday, there were so many things I wanted to know—when I saw his tall slim figure I thought how well his evening clothes suited him, how boyish and clean and enthusiastic he looked!

"How did you meet Tom?" I asked.

"Through a fellow who's in the same course at the University and who took me home to dinner one night. Awfully decent of him to ask a stranger. Tom thought you and I would like to meet as we are both English."

At first he was very shy and with his native reticence did not want to talk about himself, but gradually with the art which I had learned by hard experience, I thawed his reserve, and when after a momentary hesitation I said that I had stayed in Bermanton and knew it rather well, the last remnant of it disappeared and soon he was chatting proudly about his father. How my ears and heart drank up every word he uttered!

"I'm over here to study engineering. I have taken a course at home, but the Governor wants me to know something of other people's ideas. He's manager of a big steel works, but he says I must have a larger job. I say that's not likely, for I haven't his brains."

Manager of a big steel works—how well I knew it! "You think a great deal of him!" I said, watching delightedly the pride in his face.

"I should say I do. It was the only thing I hated [301]

leaving for, but he wanted me to get some broader ideas. He's great, is the Governor—we're real pals, play golf together and go to footer matches and all sorts of things."

Again thankfulness filled my heart. If instead of this keen boyish pride in his father, there had been that slurred sense of shame, of unconscious making-excuses which is so blighting to young sensibility. Where might his clean wholesome youth have gone but for this friendship? In my heart I thanked my dear one that he had so well kept that promise—"I will do my best for him for the sake of your love."

His smile faded as I told him something of how Marian had come to me and his eyes were alight as he said, "And so you adopted her, I think that was fine."

"You must come in again on Sunday afternoon and see her—" and from this time forth Marian took possession of him, while I was touched by his good-tempered willingness to meet her many demands. Soon one of the most effective punishments at my disposal was the prohibition of her visit to the living room when he was there.

One Sunday afternoon, when it was wet and stormy and none of the usual crowd had turned up, he was sitting on the floor playing with the child and feeding her with so much candy that I feared for the effects, and with mock-severity in my voice, I threatened,

"Robert Wilson, don't you know that candy is against all scientific food-laws for a baby? If you [302]

give her so much to eat, I'll forbid you to come at all!"

He looked up with his bright smile, and with a young impudence retorted, "All right, Lady Betty!"

Marian echoed him in her baby voice and my attempted authority faded in an involuntary laugh. From that time, "Lady Betty" was my title, and I grew to love its quaint formality as much as I grew to love its originator.

I was very happy with this new friendship and with Marian and Bob my life was full of a greater peace and contentment than I had ever known.

Then came that terrible day of August which made peace and contentment things hardly to be remembered. Bob came to me one evening soon after England had entered the struggle and I knew what was coming from the set solemnity of his face. "I'm going, Lady Betty," was all he said.

Although his going would make such a blank in my life, my first thought was of the man I loved, of his anxiety in the danger of his son—"Oh, Bob, what will your father say! I've guessed from what you've told me how much he thinks of you."

"He won't say anything against me joining," he answered proudly, "he's too fine a man."

It seemed only like a few hours till I was on the pier, seeing him off and trying to hide the tears which would roll down my cheeks.

"Thank you for all you've done—you've been an awfully good pal to me."

How sweet his words sounded—I had been of use [303]

to his son. "I'm glad, very glad. You'll write and tell me how you get on." As he promised the siren blew and I was left behind.

In the weeks that followed I fought a hard fight with myself. There had been many, many times when the wish to go home had been almost irresistiblemany times when longing for my birth-place had tempted me to throw over all success and friendship in the new country which had been so kind to me. Living in my native land the love of it had been a subconscious fact, not seemingly vital to daily existence, but in the long years of separation from it the sentiment had become so vivid that it seemed to have a human connection. Now more than ever I wanted to go back to my country, to share the dangers with my own people, and I think if I had not suspected that my heart was urging this legitimate excuse for a return because the hope of seeing him again was not so dead as I had thought, I should have stifled the logical arguments which were all in favour of my staving where I was. For I did not know the first thing about nursing, and it seemed more sensible to save as much money as possible and help with supplies and work for the wounded instead of rushing off impetuously before I could know whether I should be useful at home. Meantime to stifle the unrest which came through separation from the activities on the other side, I took a course in motor mechanics and learned to become an efficient driver.

Bob did not forget his promise and letters arrived [304]

intermittently, nearly always scribbled in pencil and often hastily before going into action, but always bringing me happiness, always making more vivid the courage and devotion of those young lives in Europe. It almost seemed as though I watched the progress of a son.

And then Bertie Wilfred had volunteered and in Margaret's letter I read pride and trembling fear—then it was John Hovey who had made the great sacrifice—George King who had been wounded and whose life hung in the balance—and pride and triumph were interwoven with a dread of the next news that might come. It seemed that there were two of me—the one living in New York, earning a livelihood, making Red Cross supplies, looking after Marian, talking and laughing on those Sunday afternoons—the other suffering at the blows which were being struck at England, watchful, waiting, fearing.

He would be too old to volunteer—surely! And in any case a man in control of such a huge steel works would be too valuable at home—of course he would not be accepted!

And the months passed and it was August 1915, the first anniversary of the War, when a letter came to me with a black-edged border.

The address swam before my eyes, as I thought fearfully, "Who is the next to be thus stricken?" Quickly I tore it open—"Dear Lady Betty"—then it was from Bob—he was alive—but there was death—in—his—

family. Fear beat on my brain, dimming my eyes till I could not see.

I do not know how many frozen minutes I sat until Marian came running to me, her gay voice shattering my stupor. And as I read, I realised that my calm acceptance of a placid middle age was simply a delusion, that underneath it all my spirit was as young and rebellious as ever. . . .

"I am home on leave for two days for my Mother's funeral," he wrote. "She died quite suddenly three days ago before I could get back to see her. One more day with the Governor and then back to the Front. I'll write you again from there."

The words danced across the page and then over the decency which demanded sorrow for death as its tribute, surged elation and expectation. I tried to stifle it, tried only to think pitifully of the woman who had had so much and who had lost it all even to the love of her son—but over all sang the words, "Then he is free!"

And the woman of thirty-five who had struggled and suffered and failed found the incurable youth in her shyly watching the mails, feeling again that sense of adventure and possibility. Sternly and logically she reminded her heart of its inconsistency—of the unsurmountable barrier of marriage, of its anger with another who had soon forgotten his wife—but to no purpose as her heart blithely answered, "This is different, it is as if a stranger had died—he lost his wife long ago—and I love him!"

Thus into my life which had become so calm was introduced that old sensation of mingled hope and fear, of expectancy and despondency. Week after week went by, October, November, December came and went, till pride inserted the beginning of a fear-"He has forgotten you!" And as two more months were added to those which had passed, pride gradually turned tenderness into a scornful sneer at the woman who had been hoping-"Betty, my dear, you are an incurable optimist. Did you suppose that he would remember thus long, when others have forgotten so soon! It is likely that by now he can hardly remember your existence—the sooner you attain the same state of feeling towards him, the better. ness is the only career for you and it is quite time. at your age, that marriage was put out of your thoughts!"

Sometimes when the hurt to pride and love stung most keenly I thought, "What a fool I have been not to take what I could get!" Once again I tried to stifle thought by incessant work so that I hardly saw my little Marian.

But with the extra strain, my brain began to grow clogged and weary and a day came when I had to admit that if I did not slacken, the result might be a breakdown. With the knowledge came the realisation that at thirty-five I could not live in that old state of nervous tension and feel no effect, and the thought that on my health depended my ability to provide for Marian was a sufficiently urgent factor to make com-

mon sense triumph over that driving bitterness. Mr. Richards had apparently been watching me for he readily agreed to my suggestion that as I was just about all in, I would like to go into the country from Friday till Tuesday.

"I am glad you have the sense to stop in time—just lately you've been driving along like a whirlwind, and you look tired——" he paused and his eyes twinkled—"to say nothing of the fact that you've been inclined to snap off the head of every one within reach!"

"Please forgive me," I smiled; "a few days with Marian will bring back my natural sweetness!" And as I went out I reflected on the friendship which had grown between us, a deep affectionate regard which although unusual between man and woman is yet one of the most delightful of human relationships.

Thus I went away from the restlessness and strife of the City to find peace and healing.

And in the presence of the love which the child gave me and by the side of a lake in the mountains, bitterness and resentment slowly faded away. In the midst of the great rolling heights around me, with their purples and greys and blacks, the pettiness of pride and vanity and hurt love could not exist—with the soft arms of the child around my neck and her voice whispering that it was nicer to play with me than nurse, it seemed another world than the restless, driving one where success and attainment were the motives.

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As I sat at the edge of a tiny beach where Marian was busy making sand pies, I had time to think; and in those few quiet days I began to understand in a vague dim way the meaning of the endless struggle to do right. . . .

Every ideal that had been achieved, every vital faith which had been fought for, lived for, died for, left its impression on the men who followed. If every generation went on living for the comfort of the moment, life would become a dead monotony of days It was that glorious trait in human without hope. nature, the necessity for struggling towards an idealthe willingness to die for it, even to live for it, often so much the harder—which made it almost impossible not to believe in a spiritual life. I had lost my faith, or rather my childish acceptance of creeds and immortality, but now as I looked back on the generations which had been, right from the beginning of time, I saw the spirit-struggling, failing, sinking, reviving, bursting into flame again, never quite dying—the spirit which urges human nature to a beauty of life which they can but dimly realise. The boys in the trenches were fighting in the same spirit as those Crusaders of old—not perhaps quite realising why they left home and wife and child, or the comfort of the old house for pain and mud and death, but urged thereto by that spiritual striving towards the highest duty.

Now I began to see the use of my own struggles to understand that the cessation of effort to follow the course to which our ideals point means death and

stagnation; that this is communicable to those around us, halting the upward stride of that struggle towards ultimate perfection. I saw my Mother's shining spirit struggling on in the path of duty, undaunted by lone-liness, poverty or difficulty, the beauty of her ceaseless loving effort communicating itself to me, so that though I wanted peace and comfort I could not take them by so great a loss. I saw the sacrifice of passionate love which we had made in our effort to do right communicating its results to the son, and to Marian, and through them to the future generations, strengthening the link which sends each one onward, fighting, striving towards the ultimate good.

A wonderful peace fell upon my heart, a loving pity for the struggles of humanity; and through it I began to understand the possibility of a love so great, so comprehensive, so understanding that judgment of folly and sin was tempered by a vivid loving sympathy for our failures and struggles, by a great joy in the few triumphs. And this seeing Love was altogether excellent, godlike—it was what we understood by Divine. . . .

Tired of play, Marian climbed into my lap. Soon her eyes had closed and before the sun had touched the top of a distant mountain, she was asleep. I looked at the perfection of her innocence and beauty, and leaning my cheek against her hair, I made a vow with all my heart and strength . . . "Teach her that courage and truth are the pillars of her being—that courage and sincerity are of so much more importance than

her way of coming in at a door."... The creed my Mother had believed in and in which she had striven to bring up her own daughter should be my guide in bringing up her name-sake. As far as I could do the work she should deserve the name of Marian, in memory of the Mother I loved, whose ideals had been so noble.

And in this work the first step was the conquest of my own faults—faults which seemed well-nigh unconquerable. Should I ever attain the patience, the wisdom, the sweetness of my Mother? It always seemed as though I saw a glimpse of the way and then pride, resentment, success, vanity covered the path and I failed again.

"Oh, my little Mother, I am afraid that I shall never attain your beauty of life, but for your sake and for that of my little Marian, I must go on trying!"

Chapter Ten

THE tremendous thing has happened and my future is changed. A few days ago I was a woman of thirty-five, feeling younger than my years when things went well, or when I was playing with Marian—at other times realising that working and striving and suffering are not apt to lengthen one's grasp on youth. To-day my feelings are more like those of twenty—gay, irresponsible, impetuous. My calm acceptance of middle age, of a placid future has vanished while once again heart is ruling over head. Can I collect my thoughts well enough to write about it, I wonder!

I was sitting in my big chair with my arms round Marian who had been bathed and made ready for bed before I had come in, but who on my appearance had refused to go until she had seen me "for just a teeny while!"

The clock struck seven as she climbed into my lap and I said, "It's time for little girls to be in bed—only five minutes then!"—whereupon she snuggled closer and I realised sadly how few minutes of the day I was able to spend with her, how difficult it would be for me to carry out the vow I had made when so much of my time had to be taken by business interests. I had turned off all the lights so that she might go to

sleep, and as she gradually ceased chattering, I think my own eyes closed as I was gazing thoughtfully into the fire.

Footsteps along the corridor startled me and as they stopped before my door, I wondered that John had broken his punctilious habit of announcing visitors. I heard the nurse responding to a peremptory knock, the door of my living room opened as I caught the end of a sentence—"No, don't announce me"—and a big figure stood in the half darkness. As it came into the light of the fire my heart seemed to stop, and I thought that indeed I had fallen asleep and must be dreaming. No—for the deep voice I loved said, "Betty!"

Emotion choked me so that I could not speak, could only stare stupidly. Our eyes met over the sleeping child. "Betty!" he said again, "it is you."

In that curious superficial way in which the mind will detach itself from an issue which is holding the nerves tense, I thought of a story I had just read where, after long separation, a man and woman meet, expressing their emotion in beautiful fluent language. But though I struggled, only a stupid, "Yes," came in a shaky voice.

Then I realised that his gaze had left me and was resting on Marian—"Whose child is that?"

"Mine," I answered breathlessly, my mind whirling.
"Yours—the boy didn't tell me—you are married, then I'm too late."

"No, no, I'm not—I'll explain it all in a minute, if

you'll sit down while I get my breath. It's such a surprise to see you. Wait till I put Marian to bed and then we can talk."

But as I came back I felt shy and constrained, conscious that he was watching me keenly, and nervousness making me more talkative, my voice rose into that high pitch of excitement as I rattled on, telling him of my adopted daughter and all that had happened since I left him—"How is Bob?" I asked, abruptly ending a stammering sentence.

"He was all right when I heard, a week ago. Though he had mentioned you in his letters from New York, it was only casually and never by name. But as we were talking before he went to the front, he spoke of 'Lady Betty.' 'Who is that?' I asked—'That's the woman who mothered me in New York, who was so good to me. Her real name is Betty Marchand. "Lady Betty" is just a joke because she looked dignified.'—And only then did I realise that it was you who had befriended my boy. From the few words he said, I imagine he thinks an awful lot of you."

"I love him too, he's fine,"—then shyly, "you kept your promise!"

As there was no answer I glanced up and selfconsciousness and constraint disappeared under the look in his blue eyes. Suddenly his arms were round me and the long years that had passed faded into the glorious happiness of the present.

Later a thought stole in on the glowing content—[314]

what of Marian? Would he be willing to have her when she was not even my child? To me she had become my very own so that I was scarcely conscious that she was not of my flesh and blood, and the thought of making a choice sent the colour from my cheeks. It was a few moments before I could say—"I adopted Marian because I promised her dead Mother I would look after her, and——"

"You want to keep her with us when we are married?"

"Oh, yes," I answered eagerly, earnestly, "I couldn't bear to leave her to the care of strangers."

"Well, would she object to become 'our baby', do you think?" That boyish humour flickered in his eyes as with a relieved sigh I exclaimed, "Oh, how happy I am! She and Bob are already great friends, she's always asking me where he is."

Sadness passed over his face; I knew his constant anxiety and rejoicing that now I had the right to comfort him, I leaned my face against his hair in silent sympathy.

That happened a week ago—to-morrow I am going to be married! I can't believe it, it is like a dream.

I wanted more time, I couldn't be ready so soon, I would have no clothes, so I pleaded, smiling, while all the time the woman in me gloried in his impetuosity, as with his imperious will he dominated me, the determined, self-willed Betty, and I agreed quite meekly. About one thing only was I determined—not to leave

Oldhams in the lurch. Because the Wroten Works were engaged on government work he had to hurry back—he had only been able to get leave because he hadn't taken a single holiday since the war began—whereas it would be at least a month before I could arrange my affairs with Oldhams. When he realised that I would be distressed to cause them more than the necessary inconvenience, he agreed that I should follow him in about three weeks' time.

"To-morrow I am going to be married!"—I keep saying it over and over again.

To-day as I was putting on my hat before the mirror in my living room, he came behind me and I saw his great figure towering above. "Are you looking at my grey hairs?" I asked smiling.

"No, at my own. I am getting quite old, dearest, though I don't feel it now!"

"I don't think so!" As I leaned back against him, rejoicing in the feeling of strength and safety after so many years alone, I thought of the many to whom happiness had not come. "Shall I be useful over there? I can't nurse a bit, but I can drive a machine! I don't want to be only happy!"

"There's heaps to do! And I think you'll find it very near home." He paused and his face was grim and solemn as he said, "There have been about a hundred men from the shop who could be spared from Government work—some of them are dead, many still fighting. Betty, almost each man has a wife or a

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mother or children who need love and a helping hand
—I don't think you'll want to drive a machine!"

And in the solemnity of the thought of their suffering came another suggested by my older, wiser self—"You who have been your own mistress for eighteen years, are you going to be able to subordinate your whims and fancies and tempers sufficiently to make marriage a success?"—"I have been successful in business, why not in marriage!"—"Marriage is so much more difficult."

I pulled a face—"Of course, I'm going to make it a success, old grim-bones."

"Are you pulling faces at me?" asked my dear one with his mischievous smile.

"No, sir,—but at 'the competent business woman' who is suggesting that I may not make you happy. But I will, I will."

"I am not afraid."

"Neither am I. To-day I am happy, we'll let the to-morrow's take care of themselves. I am tired of being prudent." And I thrust everything but my happiness out of my thoughts.

To-morrow is my wedding-day. Then only a few days here alone and I sail for home—for home! Yet in spite of the glory of the thought my heart goes out in gratitude to the soil on which I stand which has given me hospitality for many years, through which has come to me success, love, friendship and my little Marian, and I make a solemn promise that if in the

days to come I hold another child in my arms, it shall never lessen my love for her who was given to me by the gentle Sadie.

It is nearly midnight; soon another day will come bringing the realisation of those girlish dreams to which are added the woman's knowledge of Life; and with the thought comes a passing regret for the many years which have gone, for the few which are left for so much happiness.

It seems as though I can feel my Mother's hand upon my head, as she smiles her joy in the triumph of her creed and tells me that her unending love goes with me to the new life.

"Oh, little darling Mother, you are surely with me to-night—you know how gloriously happy I am!"

